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OR, The Racket at Red Hot.

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AUTHOR OF "DAISY DARE," "VIOLET VANE,"
"VIOLET VANE'S VICTORY," "WILD
VULCAN," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

"TWO BAWSTON LADS."

We are two jolly Bawston lads
Come out upon a spree,
And you can b't we are no cads,
Though dandies we may be;
We dress in style, our clothes are sleek,
You bet your pile we have the cheek—
Two Bawston lads are we!

"THEE HOW BEAUTIFULLY HE THTANDS ON HITH HEAD!" CRIED THE LAUGHING FOP,
AS HE STEADIED THE TERROR IN A REVERSED POSITION.

"We came out West to take the air
Where air for all is free;
We're bound to make the natives stare
Wherever we may be:
The girls we mash, the little dears!
We have the cash, though young in years—
Two Bawston lads are we!"

"The people smile where'er we go
And look at us in awe;
The reason why is plain, you know—
Our match they never saw.
'Get on to that!' is what they cry;
You bet your hat we're very fly—
Two Bawston lads are we!"

"Great Scott!"
"I'll be derned!"
"Dad-burn my eyes!"
"Howly Mither av Mowses!"

The inmates of the Happy-Go-Lucky Saloon were quite knocked aghast. It was not the song that astonished them so much as it was the singers, who had suddenly walked in out of the darkness, shoulder to shoulder, through the open door and had commenced to sing as soon as they were fairly through the portal.

And no wonder! Never before had such individuals appeared within the limits of the rustling little mining-town of Red Hot.

"Two doods, by thunder!" howled Red Hutch, one of the "Twin Bulldogs," driving the huge clinched fist of his right hand into the open palm of his left, the resounding smack sounding almost as loud as the report of a pistol.

The strangers appeared to be exactly of a height, and somewhat below the average stature of men, but, although small, both were well-formed and supple in aspect, with square shoulders and well-rounded limbs. Both were dressed exactly alike in black velvet suits, patent-leather boots, white shirts, collars, neckties, etc., and their high shining silk hats were canted in a rakish manner. In their fingers they skillfully twirled light canes of ebony color, with shining gold heads, while eyeglasses dangled from their vests.

One of the dandies was light complexioned; the other, dark. Both wore graceful pointed mustaches, and both were as near handsome, without being effeminate, as two such men could be. He of the light complexion wore a delicate gold pin in his tie, representing a daisy, a small diamond of the first water flashing in the center of the flower. Three fresh wild daisies adorned the lapel of his coat. The other also wore a tasty diamond pin, but the flowers upon his coat were mountain violets, bright and fragrant.

Smiling and bowing with the grace of variety actors on the mimic stage, the little fops sung their song with an air, spirit and delightful richness that would have won them a round of applause from a refined audience. When it was ended there was a moment of silence, followed by exclamations of mirth, amazement and disgust from the crowd in the saloon.

"Hurro!" bellowed Lively Larry O'Ray, the proprietor of the Happy-Go-Lucky, smiting the bar with one knotted fist. "May the devil floy away wid me if Oi iver sit oies on the loikes av them! Phwat for be they, onnyway?"

"Doods, I tell ye!" shouted Red Hutch, with a growling chuckle of delight. "They grow in ther East, an' come out West ter be killed. Howlin' thunder! w'at er racket we'll hev!"

Black Hutch, the other "Twin," said not a word, but he scowled at the strangers in a way that was far from inviting.

"The Twin Bulldogs" were ruffians of the lowest and coarsest type, being bullies, drunkards and very "bad" men. It was not known that they were brothers, but both gave their names as Hutch, and as one had a fiery red beard, he was called Red Hutch. The hair and beard of the other were dead black, so he was designated as Black Hutch. Since appearing in Red Hot they had been concerned in several crooked and bloody affairs, but the citizens of the place were so much in awe of them that they had escaped thus far the punishment they so thoroughly merited.

Like a squirming snake, a rounded, misshapen figure glided to Black Hutch's side and touched the ruffian's sleeve cautiously, whispering as a serpent might hiss:

"Shell I give 'em the knife, boss?"

Wretch though he was, the man shrank from the touch of the repulsive creature, whose little red eyes were dancing unsteadily beneath the hairless eyebrows and lashless lids, while his small round tongue played out and in between his slightly parted lips in a horribly repugnant manner.

"No," he growled. "Get out! W'en I want ye I'll guv ther sign."

The creature addressed wrinkled his spotted

face of red and blue, bowed his head with an undulating motion and squirmed away again. He was called Snaky Slink, and was often spoken of as the Bulldogs' "Tool,"—a heartless, treacherous wretch, scarcely human, who stood ready to do the bidding of the two ruffians and apparently delighted in the work.

"Why, Cholly!" drawled the light complexioned dandy, showing symptoms of mild surprise: "what a confounded menagerie we have stumbled into! I wondah where all these animals came fwom?"

"Aw, Fweddie, deah boy," replied the wearer of the violets. "I am weakly unable to infwom you. It is a werry astonishing spectacle, bah Jove!"

Then each of the dandies clasped their eyeglasses between the thumb and fore-finger of their left hands and, with a sweeping, well-studied gesture, lifted and adjusted them to their eyes. Then, with the heads of their canes against their lips, they inclined their bodies slightly forward and gazed intently at the astonished crowd within the saloon.

"Roarin' blue blazes!" snarled Red Hutch. "Did ye hear w'at them things called us, pard? A menagerie—animals—that's w'at! Tan my hide fer boot-leather!"

"Cholly."

"Yes, Fweddie."

"Did that electwic light make a wemark?"

"I weakly think it did, deah boy."

"Why, I did not thuppose it knew how to talk!"

"You must wemember they are teaching thuch eweatures a gweat deal. It is thaid that even monkeys have a language of their own, ye know."

"Aw—the I have heard."

Red Hutch choked as if strangling, while Lively Larry pounded on the bar and roared with laughter.

"Begorra! thit is the bist thing yit! May Oi niver live t' see the back av me hid if Oi iver berrud the b'ate av it! An electric loight is it they're a carlin' av yees, Reddy? Upon me saul, Oi believe Oi will doie intoirely av larufin!"

With a snarling oath, the ruffian started toward the offensive strangers.

"I'll l'arn 'em ter insult decent people!" he asserted. "I will meck 'em wish they'd stayed ter home 'long of their mammies."

Eager to see the "fun," the crowd surged forward and surrounded the velvet dandies, who began to show symptoms of alarm.

"Good gwacious, Cholly!" gasped the wearer of the daisies, allowing his eyeglass to drop and hang dangling. "These eweatures may be weak dangerwus!"

"I am afwaid you may be wight," confessed the other. "Let's go wight out of heah."

"Hold on!" and the red-headed Bulldog confronted the dandies. "Don't be in sich er hurry. I've er little bone ter pick with you blamed doods."

"Thir!" exclaimed the violet fop, "we do not know you!"

"That is your misfortune. But I'll interjuce myself. I am Red Hutch, an' I allus meeks it a practice ter swaller sich little runts ez you be without stoppin' ter grease 'em."

"Thakes alive!"

"Goodness gwacious!"

"You hev insulted ever'one present," continued the bully, glaring at the cringing strangers in his most ugly manner, "an' you hev insulted me in partic'ler. Now I mean to meck ye pay fer it."

At this both of the velvet dandies thrust their hands into their pockets, eagerly asking:

"How much is the bill, thir?"

"It's er blamed sight bigger one than you can settle in that way, an' so I mean ter take it out of yer hides."

At this the strangers uttered cries of apparent dismay and fear.

"Oh, thir, would you weakly hurt uth?" they exclaimed.

"Oh, not very bad," grinned the bully, enjoying their apparent fright. "I'm jest goin' ter pick ye up by ther collars, guv ye er little shakin' an' then thump yer heads tergether six or nine times, that's all." And he spat on his hands in a business-like manner.

"Take care, thir!" cried the one who wore the daisies, lifting his voice to a high pitch and shaking his cane at Red Hutch. "You may get yourself into trouble. We are gentlemen, thir, and we came fwom Bawston. If you injure uth, you will be pwosecuted for athault and batterwy."

"That's wight, Fweddie," put in the other; "don't be afwaid of the horwid thing."

"If he twies to injure me, I shall slap him weal hard, wight in the face," declared "Fweddie."

At this the Bulldog burst into a roar of laughter.

"Hol hol hol!" he chuckled. "Reg'ler little bantam, by smoke! Now watch fer fun."

"Keep away, thir, keep away!" squawked the daisy dandy, in great excitement. "When I stwike I stwike weal hard!"

But Red Hutch did not heed the warning. Plunging forward, he made a grab at the drawing, lisping "Bawston lads," when—
Smack!

"Fweddie's" open hand struck the big ruffian fair in the face with such force that Red Hutch came near measuring his length on the floor!

CHAPTER II.

RED HUTCH STANDS ON HIS HEAD.

A GASP of amazement came from the spectators and a howl of fury broke from the lips of the astounded Bulldog.

"Hivenly Vargin!" cried Larry O'Ray. "The devil an' all will be t' pay noow!"

Black Hutch looked on as if unconcerned, but with a savage execration the red-headed ruffian drew a long shining knife fairly snarling:

"I'll hev your blood fer that, you little imp of sin!"

But at that moment a commanding figure stepped between the tough and his intended victim, who seemed appalled by his own act.

"Major Mars!" cried several.

Truly the man had the carriage and appearance of an old soldier, presumably of the Confederate Army. His hair and beard were quite gray, but his figure was erect and his shoulders square, while his eyes were concealed by large gold-bowed glasses. His face was quite florid, making it apparent he indulged a strong thirst for the "social glass."

"Hold on, gentlemen!" he commanded, in a round, strong voice. "Let's have this trouble settled in a fair and square manner. That has always been my motto, in peace or in war: 'Fair and square.' It is a good motto to stick by."

"Git out of ther way!" shouted the ruffian with the knife. "I don't hev no meddlin' in my 'fairs."

"Sar!"

With that one word, the old soldier turned his spectacles on Red Hutch and stood like marble, staring straight at the tough. The angry Bulldog could not see the major's eyes, but he seemed to feel them upon his person.

For several moments the two men stood staring at each other, but the old soldier conquered. With a smothered oath, the tough let his eyes fall, but he snarled:

"You shell pay fer this, derned ef ye sha'n't!"

The major bowed.

"Very well, sar; you will find I am not to be bullied. I have, during my brief stay in this town, avoided trouble with you and your mate for reasons of my own, but you shall discover I do not fear you more than two snapping curs. I am not the man to stand idly by and see these young tenderfeet murdered in cold blood."

"Wal, w'at d'yer want?"

"Fair play for them is all I ask. In this country every man has to fight his way. They will have to do the same, or get out."

A gleam of satisfaction shot from the Bulldog's eyes.

"All I want is er show at that little rat," he declared; "an' I will hev that. He's got ter fight me!"

"My goodness gwacious!" gasped the daisy dandy. "I cawn't!"

"But ye've got ter."

"Why, I nevah did such aw—aw—beastly thing in my life!"

"Then it's time ye begun. I'm goin' ter giv ye a wallopin' anyhow."

"Oh, Cholly!" wailed the seemingly frightened fop.

"Deah Fweddie!"

"I wish I had nevah left Bawston!"

"Tho do I!"

"We shall be killed in thith blawsted bloody countwy!"

"I'm afwaid tho."

"You shall be given a fair show," assured Major Mars. "I have found it necessary to fight my way—wherever I go, and you will be forced to do the same in the rough mining camps of Colorado. I am sorry for you, gentlemen, but you have angered one of the fighting men of Red Hot and you must give him satisfaction. My advice is to stand up to him and do your level best."

"But I don't know how to fight, ye know," cried the wearer of the daisies.

"You can wassle, Fweddie," said the other dandy, in a loud whisper. "You are alwus bwagging about wassling at college."

"Oh, Cholly! I cawn't wassle with that big w'etch?"

"Bettah wassle than fight, deah boy."

"Perhaps Mr. Hutch will consent to wrestle with you," said Major Mars, turning to the scowling bully.

Red Hutch shook his head.

"I had rather hev er chance ter punch his poorty face."

"Arrah, noow doon't be afther makin' a hog av yerself, Reddy!" exclaimed fearless Larry O'Ray. "The b'y w'u'dn't be not a bit av a flae-boight fer yees at foightin', an' if ye doon't be carreful ye will break bis bark if he consints t' wrestle."

At this an eager look came into the ruffian's face.

"I kin break his back or his neck," he thought; and he at once consented to wrestle.

The daisy dandy held back for a time, but finally consented to wrestle with Red Hutch if the big fellow would "be easy."

"Oh, yes, I'll be easy!" chuckled the ruffian. "I'll handle ye like I loved ye."

"If there is anything I do detest it ith a person who ith wough—it ith the indecent," said the little fop.

Red Hutch made no preparations for the match, for he expected to handle his insignificant foe without putting himself to any trouble at all. He grinned slyly as he thought how he would shake the lisping fop out of his finely fitting clothes.

Black Hutch drew his pard aside and whispered:

"W'at d'yer mean ter do?"

"Break ther little rat's neck," was the reply.

"Thet's right, but ther Spotter guy me er hint ez he slipped out er few minutes ergo."

"Wal?"

"He said them little cusses are wuss'n p'isen."

"How's he know?"

"Said he'd seen one of 'em afore."

"Wal, I don't keer fer no drawlin' dood."

"Thet's ali right, but ye want ter fetch him fu'st jump. Don't let him work ary trick on ye."

"Him work er trick on me! Wal, I sw'ar!"

Red Hutch was unable to express his disgust.

Meanwhile the daisy dandy had handed his hat and cane to his companion of the violets, but, instead of removing his velvet coat, he buttoned it closely around him.

"You had better take it off," advised Major Mars. "You will need to be quite unhampered, and the garment may get torn."

"Oh, I hawdly think tho. I thall look out for mytnelf, thir. Thith ith not the firth time I have had to defend mythself, and I am no slouch, if you will—aw—pawdon the wulgah expwession."

The old soldier nodded and lifted his hand to his face as if to conceal a smile.

"You will find Red Hutch a hard man to handle."

"Begorra! thit is a fact!" nodded Lively Larry, who had left his place behind the bar to see the sport. "Oi'm tellin' av yees the truth whin Oi say he's as tricherous as the devil. Oi'm afraid he m'anies t' hurrut yees, pard."

"Weally?"

The good-natured Irishman nodded.

"Oh, Cholly!"

"Deah Fweddie!"

"I wish I wath in Bawston!"

"Brathe up, deah boy!"

But "Fweddie" seemed incapable of following his friend's advice. He looked very limp and trembly and seemed to have a great desire to sink through the floor.

"Come, you undersized monkey," cried Red Hutch. "Are you ready fer ther clinch?"

"I'm weddy to faint," gasped the wearer of the daisies. "I—I—I weally think I had betta go out where I can get the air; it ith extbeedingly close in heab."

If allowed to leave the room, the indications were the frightened fellow would at once take to his heels.

"You can't back out now," asserted one of the crowd.

"I thuppose, thir," said the daisy dandy, hesitatingly, "you will allow me the choice of how we thall wassle?"

Hutch nodded.

"I don't keer how it is so long as I git at ye."

"Well, then it thall be catch ath you can."

"All right; that suits me. Are you ready?"

"Yeth, thir."

The next moment the big bully made a rush for the dandy, but, with the nimbleness of a very lively flea, the little man dodged Red Hutch's grasp and danced lightly out of his reach, crying:

"Give me plenty of woom, gentlemen; that ith all I ask."

Larry O'Ray instantly forced the crowd back so the dandy might have all the space he could desire.

"So you're a dodger," snapped the surprised ruffian. "Wal, I'll git my claws on ye next time."

But he did not; once more the nimble fop evaded his waving arms, actually laughing in his face.

"Thith ith as good as blind man's buff, bar Jove!" he giggled.

"You're doing thplendid, Fweddie," cried the violet fop. "If you can keep it up, you are thure to tucker him out, then you can throw him eathy."

"Oh, I know my busineth," declared the wrestler, whose spirits seemed on the rise.

"Oh, ye do, do ye?" sneered the furious Bulldog. "Wal, we'll see 'bout that."

Then for two or three minutes Red Hutch did his level best to get his hands on the dandy, but just when he would feel sure of the fop, the nimble fellow would evade his grasp and slip behind him, sometimes passing under the awkward ruffian's arm. The spectators laughed and cheered, while the bully grew hot and desperate. Finally he came to a halt, panting and glaring at the slippery "Bawston lad."

Smiling in the most tantalizing manner, the unruffled dandy delicately clasped his eyeglass with his thumb and fore-finger, gracefully lifted it and adjusted it to his eye, bent his body forward slightly, and, staring quizzically at the enraged desperado, called out sweetly:

"Aw there!"

"W'at kind of rasslin' do ye call this?" howled Red Hutch.

"Catch ath you can, deah thir!"

With a snarled oath, the angry tough made another dive at his exasperating opponent. Like an eel, the dandy slipped under the big fellow's arm.

Then an amazing thing occurred.

Half-turning, the daisy dandy caught with his lowered left hand a convenient portion of the eluded bully's pantaloons, at the same time grasping with his right hand the tough's collar at the back of the neck. Then, with a strong surge, the wearer of the daisies lifted Red Hutch off his feet, swinging him up almost over his shoulder. The Bulldog's feet flew up into the air and his head went down toward the floor.

"Thee how beautifully he thtands on thith head!" cried the laughing fop, as he steadied the Terror in a reversed position, with his head on the floor and his heels waving wildly in the air.

CHAPTER III.

"THE POSY PARDS."

A GREAT shout of amazement came from the spectators. They could scarcely believe the evidence of their eyes. Was it possible the lisping dandy had stood one of the biggest and toughest men of Red Hot on his head?

"May the Howly S'nts defind us?" yelled Larry O'Ray. "Oi hope Oi may be did to-morry if Oi iver saw the loikes av thit! Hurro!"

Black Hutch howled in his rage and amazement.

"Goodness gwacious!" cried "Cholly," staring at his friend.

Then the deceiving dandy allowed Red Hutch to fall upon his back, where the bully lay several minutes, looking quite crestfallen and disgusted, as well as completely bewildered. It was plain he did not fully comprehend what had happened.

"Bah Jove, ye know, I'm just getting warmed up to thith busineth!" declared the wearer of the daisies, clinching his right hand and moving it up and down, while with his left hand he felt of the muscle in his right arm above the elbow. "I've got a terwible hard bunch there."

The idea of the little fop having much muscle would have seemed ridiculous if he had not already displayed a wonderful amount of strength.

"Begorra, Oi believ it!" nodded Lively Larry.

"Wonderful, wonderful!" exclaimed Major Mars, rubbing his hands together with apparent satisfaction. "I am quite astounded; it is the most astonishing thing I ever witnessed."

Red Hutch arose to a sitting posture and looked around.

"How in thunder kem I down hyer?" he muttered. "I don't jest seem ter take in w'at's happened."

"You've been standing on your ear, old man," cried one of the crowd.

"When did you join the circus?" inquired another.

The bewildered Bulldog's eyes fell on the laughing dandy of the daisies, and then Red Hutch began to swear.

"Cust ef I know how ye dun it!" he snarled.

"But I don't fool no more with you. I'll fix ye this time."

Then he leaped to his feet, again drawing his long knife. The daisy dandy retreated precipitately before the Bulldog's headlong rush, but with a cry of rage, the one who wore the violets threw himself before the bully.

"Sthop, thir!" he shouted, lifting his own cane with his right hand while he held his friend's bat and cane in his left. "Sthop, thir, or I shall strike you!"

"Derned ef I don't carve ye both!" howled Red Hutch, making a savage lunge at the dandy.

But the gleaming knife did not touch the little fellow.

Swish—slap!

The slender cane cut through the air and landed on Red Hutch's left cheek, causing the wretch to utter a howl of amazement and pain, and at the same instant the violet fop leaped out of reach of the knife.

"Oh, Cholly!" gasped the daisy fop.

"Deah Fweddie!"

"You thaved my lifel!"

"Don't mention it, chummy."

"Tan my hide!" shouted the Bulldog. "I hain't done with ye, not by er good bit! I'm goin' ter cut ye up fer mince-meat!"

"Goodness gwacious!"

"Thakes alive!"

Once more Red Hutch made a rush, and once more he was met by the dandy with the cane. How that slender stick did whistle through the air! The Bulldog tried to guard his face with his upraised left hand, but the cane stung his wrist, beat the dust from his woolen shirt around his shoulders, making it almost seem he had been attacked by a swarm of angry hornets.

"Hurro!" cried Larry O'Ray, clapping his hands and roaring with laughter. "Will ye luke at thit noowl! By my troth, Reddy is afther gettin' the wurrust av it!"

"I fancy those dandies can take care of themselves," said Major Mars.

It began to be evident the major was right. Neither of the fops was so helpless as he had at first appeared.

Red Hutch persisted in his desperate attempt to reach the one who wore the violets, but the little fellow was quite as nimble as his companion, while he handled his cane with the skill of an expert swordsman.

"I beg your pawdon, deah thir," entreated the violet dandy, giving Hutch a stinging cut on his right jaw. "I weally do," he added, giving him another on the left jaw. "Thith mutht be werry unpleathant, but it—aw—cawn't be helped, ye know."

The scene was both tragic and humorous, for although it might have a bloody ending, it was a comical thing to see the little dandy dancing lightly out of the ruffian's reach, striking the big fellow again and again, all the while politely asking pardon.

The scowl on Black Hutch's face grew fiercer as he watched the scene, and unconsciously his hand stole toward a concealed weapon.

"Derned ef I hain't a good mine' ter take er han'l!" he muttered.

Once more that snaky figure stole to his side, and again he felt that soft, unpleasant touch on his arm.

"Can't I stick 'em, boss?" came the serpent-like hiss in his ear.

Black Hutch hesitated, but finally replied:

"No. I reckon we'll take keer of them critters ourselves. We hain't goin' ter hev no store-toggod doodz crawl over us. Ef we don't down 'em, ther bull blamed town'll laff. I opine Red'll git at that cuss yit."

Slink watched the singular battle, his little red eyes dancing, his tongue playing between his slightly parted lips, and his body from the waist up bowing with that serpentine, undulating motion. The very embodiment of all that is evil, cruel and repulsive he seemed.

"I'd like ter cut 'em!" he hissed. "I'd like ter streak them fine togs with ribbons of red!"

Again the brutal Bulldog shuddered and drew away from the horrible creature, his coarse nature—in which possibly a spark of

manhood still remained—shocked by the utter feindishness of his trusted tool.

"Get out!" he growled.

Without a protest the disgusting wretch slunk away, not resenting his master's manner in the least.

Meantime Red Hutch had forced the violet dandy into a corner, from which there seemed no escape.

"Ah-a!" he cried, exultantly. "I hev ye now!"

"Do you weally think tho?"

"I'm sure of it."

But, he was not so sure. Swish! swish! swish! cut the cane, and the ruffian felt three stinging blows on his right wrist—three blows that seemed to paralyze his hand and caused the knife to drop from his fingers. Vainly he had tried to catch the cane and tear it from the little man's grasp, and now he was disarmed, the knife standing quivering in the floor, where it had struck point down.

For an instant Red Hutch stood staring in helpless rage at his nimble foe, the blood beginning to trickle down his face from a dozen places where the stout little cane had struck. The violet dandy made him a very polite bow, then turned calmly away to pass the hat and cane in his left hand to his companion.

Red Hutch saw his chance, and with a howl like that of a mad-dog, he snatched out a revolver, murder gleaming in his eyes. But he did not use the weapon.

Swift as thought the wearer of the daisies leaped forward and sent the revolver flying from the big ruffian's hand, having disarmed Red Hutch with one deft kick. But, he did not stop with that.

"Confound a fool that doesn't know when he is licked!" cried the daisy dandy, without the least lisp or drawl.

The next instant, with one terrific right hand blow, he knocked the bully down, and Red Hutch lay where he fell, stunned for the time.

"By me saoul! thit knocks him out complately!" shouted Larry O'Ray.

"And ends the trouble," put in Major Mars. "Gentlemen, allow me to congratulate you on your ability to look out for yourselves."

The dandies accepted the old soldier's hand and shook it warmly. The example was infectious. Lively Larry followed and then the greater part of the spectators crowded forward with hands outstretched, and for a few minutes it seemed the "Bawston Lads" would have their arms quite shaken off.

"They're little terrors if they do wear store clothes," was the general verdict.

When the hand-shaking was over, the dandies once more tipped their silk hats on one side, struck an attitude shoulder to shoulder, and, twirling their canes, began to sing:

"We're not so fresh as we might be,
Though dressed in proper style;
Our clothes are neat, as you can see,
From shining boots to tile;
Although we're sleek and cut a dash,
We have the cheek and lug the cash—
The Posy Pards are we!"

"We pay our way and mind our biz,
We know what we're about,
We're not the lads for bums to quiz,
And they will find it out;
We're what they call quite mild and meek,
But though we're small we're not so weak—
The Posy Pards are we!"

"Now, friends, although there's been a fuss,
We think you all should 'smile,'
So face the bar and drink with us—
March up in single file;
Forget your pain and lose your care
With Violet Vane and Daisy Dare—
The Posy Pards are we!"

"Hurro for the Posy Pards!" yelled Larry O'Ray.

The crowd united in a hearty cheer of admiration, then there was a general rush for the bar.

CHAPTER IV.

"OLD SUNFLOWER."

"Whoopie!" squealed the high-pitched voice of a new-comer. "I'm jest in time ter git my bitters. I'm allus 'round on *sich* occasions, bet yer shirt! Make way thar fer Ole Sunflower, ther Sport o' ther Shaggy Pate, fer byer he comes kerwhoopin'!"

The speaker was a rather ragged-appearing tramp, who wore a battered silk hat of ancient style tipped recklessly on the back of his head, his white curly wool-like hair forming a fringe around its base. On his homely beardless face was a comical grin of careless good-nature. A

huge sunflower was conspicuously fastened on his breast.

With the nimbleness of a youth he waltzed toward the bar, but at sight of the Posy Pards he suddenly paused and struck an attitude, his left hand on his heart, his right upraised.

"Kin I believe these yere ole optics o' mine?" he cried, in apparent amazement. "What—no—yes—it can't be—yet it is! Ding my soul! ther leetle Daisy frum Denver, or my name's not Eras—Ole Sunflower, I mean!"

"Rastus, is it you?" exclaimed the Daisy Sport.

"Bet yer ducats!" was the reply, as the strange individual seized the dandy's outstretched hand and shook it warmly. "Only I'm sailin' under ther cognomen o' Ole Sunflower now. You leetle bundle o' decepshun, I'm tickled ter death ter see ye!"

"And how about me?" inquired the Violet Sport.

Old Sunflower struck another attitude of astonishment.

"Waal, now I *will* be derned!" he cried. "I reckon I must be dreamin' or goin' crazy. It can't be possible—yet I sw'ar—hang my eyes—it is! Sweet Violets, as I'm a livin' sinner! Guy ther ole man yer fin, you leetle bundle o' condensed chain-lightnin'!"

Then there was more handshaking, after which the wearer of the sunflower drew back and regarded the twin sports admiringly.

"May I die before I am a thousan' y'ars ole," he cried, "ef I ever set eyes on sich another combination as this yere. W'y it beats ther worl', it jest duz! Jee-hocus! you two kin captter ther hull dad-burned kentry! Violet Vane and Daisy Dare—two b-a-a-d met ter crowd!"

"But we are forgetting the thirsty crowd," said the Daisy Sport. "You must be a little *dry* yourself, 'Ras—Old Sunflower!"

"Waal, now you're talkin'! It's bin nigh onter forty-eight hours since I wet the inside o' my throax with anythin' stronger'n crick water. I'm jest parched with thirst an' reddy ter crack open."

Violet Vane nodded toward Larry O'Ray, who had resumed his usual place behind the bar.

"Drinks for all," he said, tossing a brace of jingling gold pieces on the bar. "Let them imbibe as long as these last."

"Thit's business," smiled the Irishman, as he hastened to set out the liquor, after capturing the money. "Pards, these are gentlemon av the rale auld sort."

"You are correct," bowed Major Mars, turning out a brimming glass and lifting it above his head. "Here's a toast:

"The Posy Pards we meet to-night;
Their clothes are black, their hearts are white."

With loud cries of "You bet!" the thirsty throng swallowed the fiery liquor.

Vane and Dare lifted their glasses to their lips, but not a swallow of the liquid poison passed them. Very unostentatiously they turned the liquor into a sawdust-filled box close at hand which served as a spittoon.

But Old Sunflower did not "waste" his in any such way. He allowed the burning liquid to run silently down his throat, having closed his eyes, a look of great satisfaction resting on his beardless face.

But suddenly a strange voice rung through the room:

"Oh, woeful sight! oh, sinful men! The door of destruction is yawning wi-dely for you! That burning draught will drag you down to the portals of a burning hell, where all sinners find their lot and por-tion. Look not on the wine-cup when it is red, for it biteth like a serpent and stingeth like an adder. The final Great Day of Judgment is r-r-rolling 'round, when each sinful soul will have to stand in the presence of the Most High and answer for the deeds done in the body. Fly, fly, fly, from the wrath to come!"

The inmates of the saloon were startled.

The ominous words had been rendered in a mournful, sing-song fashion, with strange and unexpected inflections of the voice, which at certain points would rise almost to a shout and then would sink to a low, droning wail, the genuine exhorting style which old-fashioned Methodist ministers were fond of displaying at camp-meetings forty years ago.

The speaker looked like a parson. He was a small, gray-bearded man, with slightly rounded shoulders, dressed entirely in faded black, and wearing spectacles.

"What in thunder have we here?" exclaimed one of the crowd.

"A parson, or I'm a liar!" cried another. The stranger bowed.

"I am a feeble servant of the Lord, serving Him in my humble way, doing all I can to bring unthinking sinners to repentance before it is everlasting too late and the great door of mercy is closed forever and forever. In the day of my trouble I sought the Lord, for my soul refused to be comforted, but He gave me peace and hope and joy and opened mine eyes to the blessed light of day."

Some of the crowd began to laugh, but like a flash the parson turned on them, pointing a finger accusingly in their direction.

"The world is filled with scoffers rushing onward to destruction!" he cried. "They scoffed at the prophets of old, and thus they scoff to-day, little thinking how soon the wrath of heaven may fall upon them when they least expect it. Woe, woe, woe to those who scoff!"

"Guy ther parson a drink!" shouted a voice.

Instantly the cry was taken up, and in a moment the stranger was seized and hurried toward the bar.

"A brimmer of whisky straight, Larry," cried one.

Another seized a bottle and turned out a glassful.

"Now, parson, drink it down like a little man."

"Never will I allow the poison to pass these lips!" was the reply. "Of myself I am not strong, for I am only plain Ebenezer Plank, of Vermont, but in One above I have the power to resist the wiles of Satan! Get thee behind me, is what I say, and no power on earth can compel my living body to touch the draught of hell!"

"We'll see 'bout that."

One of the toughs seized the parson's nose between his thumb and fore-finger and was about to force the man to drink; but the next instant he felt himself grasped by the collar and jerked backward, while Daisy Dare said quietly but firmly:

"Tbis joke has been carried quite far enough."

"That's a fact," nodded Violet Vane. "If a man doesn't want to drink, he shall not be forced to do so while I am around."

"Them's my sentiments, b'gosh!" shouted Old Sunflower, deftly snatching the glass of liquor from the hand of the man whom Dare held by the collar. "It's er burnin' shame fer airy man as don't like likker to be forced ter drink it w'en there is so menny as duz like it sp'ilin' fer one leetle snifter. I'll save ther parson ther trubble o' disposin' o' this." And the tramp tossed it off almost at a swallow.

"Thus," cried Parson Plank, "does the Lord raise up friends for the righteous in the midst of sinners, glory to His name!"

Murmurs of rage came from the crowd. Plainly they were not pleased at having their sport spoiled in such a manner. But Major Mars pushed his way forward.

"Pards," said the old soldier, gravely, "let us have a bit of consideration for one who is evidently cracked here"—tapping his forehead with one slender fore-finger. "A joke is a joke, but the joke of forcing people to drink is becoming stale. Let the parson slide."

The major wielded a certain power in Red Hot, and the parson was released at once, but he was advised to get out of the saloon immediately.

"I go where duty calls me," he replied, "even though it be into a fiery furnace. I have no fear of earth's feeble minions when I know the heavenly hosts a'e guarding me by night and by day. I came here to exhort sinners to repentance, and I shall not turn empty away without doing the duty my Master has pointed out in his Beautiful Word."

Violet Vane drew apart from the crowd, making a covert motion to Dare and Old Sunflower, both of whom joined him quickly.

"I have no taste to listen to a sermon now," said the Violet Sport.

"No more have I," replied Dare, whose face wore a hard, set look, now the excitement was quite over. "I did not come to this town for that purpose."

"Perhaps Erastus—excuse me! Old Sunflower I mean—may be able to render us some assistance," observed Vane.

"I'm your ter command, gents," bowed the tramp. "Ef I kin holp ye in ary way, depen' on me through thick an' thin."

Daisy Dare was silent for a few moments, then said:

"We had better go to the hotel if we wish to talk."

"You are right," acknowledged Vane.

As they were passing out they encountered Black Hutch, who was assisting his demoralized

Bulldog pard from the room. The black-bearded ruffian shot a look of deadly hate toward the Posy Pards, snarling:

"You critters shell pay well fer this yere piece of work! Mark my words, your days are numbered!"

Red Hutch braced up enough to say:

"I'll hev ther blood of ye both! You begun a mighty slick game, but it hain't ended by er good bit."

Violet Vane halted a moment, saying quietly:

"You caused the trouble and you got the worst of it. You have only yourself to blame. But I will tell you this: we have simply played with you thus far, but if you persist in bothering us, we will snuff you out as quick as we would snap our fingers. So have a care!"

Then the Posy Pards and Old Sunflower passed on, not heeding the savage oaths cast after them.

They went directly to the principal hotel of Red Hot and were soon seated in the room engaged by Vane and Dare.

"An' now," said the sunflower tramp, "w'at brings you ter Red Hot?"

"Vengeance!" hissed Daisy Dare, through his clinched teeth.

CHAPTER V.

THE MISSION OF THE POSY PARDS.

OLD SUNFLOWER looked at the Daisy Sport in amazement.

"Jeethutter!" he exclaimed. "W'at d'yer mean?"

"Exactly what I said. I am here for vengeance, and not to play the fool, although we saw fit to do so when we first appeared in town. It was difficult to carry out the farce under the circumstances, but such things have to be done sometimes. We appeared as two brainless fops, and things went about as we expected they would."

"But suthin' has happened since I saw ye last. I kin see that with ther naked eye. W'at is it? Ther leetle black-eyed wife—"

"Is dead!"

The tramp nearly fell out of his chair in amazement, and for several seconds he could not utter a sound, although he tried to speak. Finally, he managed to gasp:

"Jee-hocus! you don't mean it—you can't!"

Daisy Dare nodded.

"It is the truth, old man," he said, solemnly. "Edna is dead."

"How did it happen?"

"Of course you remember Ada Dawes, the strange girl of Roaring Bend who pretended to be the daughter of the old toper, Toddy Bob, but who was in truth the wife of Hubert Dawes, the scarlet-masked outlaw?"*

"You bet I do!"

"Well she was at the bottom of it all. She swore to have revenge on me because I was forced to shoot Hubert Dawes in self-defense."

"But you helped her ter 'scape ther lynchers w'en they called fer her."

"And made the mistake of my life. She did not forget her vow of vengeance, even though I had saved her life, and with the remnant of Scarlet's Mask's broken band, she struck to crush me—not at my life, but at the life of one who was innocent of ever harming them in any way. Their time came, and they abducted Edna."

"Go on, lad," exclaimed Old Sunflower, eagerly.

"They had a double object: to wring my heart with the knowledge of my wife's peril and to finally get me into their power. But they did not know the man they had aroused. I inaugurated a campaign against them that soon drove them to the wall. With a party of men, I came upon their encampment in a secluded and almost inaccessible pocket. A desperate battle followed, during which some of the cabins they had erected were burned down. A number of the wretches escaped, their woman leader with them. But from the lips of a dying outlaw I learned that my wife had been confined in one of the burned cabins. In the excitement of battle her cries had not been heard, and she had met a horrible death in the flames. This terrible intelligence made a madman of me for the time, and over the charred bones which I recovered from the ruins of the hut I swore an oath of vengeance. I shall never falter till the last remnant of Scarlet Mask's band is wiped from the face of the earth and their woman queen has been fitly punished."

The sunflower tramp was silent for several moments, then he said, slowly:

* See "Daisy Dare," Beadle's Half-Dime Library No. 581.

"It's jest posseble ther leetle gal hain't dead, Daisy."

Dare shook his head.

"I have thought so, but have finally decided there is no good foundation for such a hope. She is dead and her bones rest at the foot of a noble pine in that lonely mountain pocket far away. I will not try to delude myself by thinking it may be different."

"Thar wer'n't nuthin' by which ye c'u'd 'den-tify her wus they?"

"No."

"Waal, I say while thar's life thar's hope."

But the cloud did not lift from the Daisy Sport's face.

"You may look at it as you please," he said, grimly. "As for me, the future holds nothing but vengeance!"

"An' is ther woman bandit anywhere in this vicinity?"

"Yes, I have trailed her here, and I believe she is with the band led by a fellow who calls himself Captain Marvel. He is collecting toll in the vicinity of Red Hot, and, rumor says, has as a companion a beautiful woman who acts as queen of the robbers. I believe the woman is Ada Dawes."

"Jest likely ez not."

"I propose to know for sure soon, for we have come here to inaugurate a warfare against these outlaws, and we will soon have them in a tight co ner."

"Waal, now ye're shoutin'!" nodded Old Sunflower, admiringly. "Ef you two leetle cusses git arter 'em, they may ez well throw up the sponge fu'st off, fer they're boun' ter go under sooner or later. W'at a hoop-roarin' team you'll make! You'll be wuss'n er dynermite factory on wheels."

Violet Vane had remained silent while Dare was telling his story, but he now spoke up:

"Our interests are mutual to a certain extent, I believe."

"How's thet?" demanded the tramp. "You don't mean ter say that Ione o' ther gold ha'r an' sky-blue eyes is dead?"

"Not quite so bad as that, I hope," answered the wearer of the violets; "although she may be."

"Jeebucus! More trubble, or I'm er saint!"

"Yes, my enemies hold the high cards of the game at the present time."

"Then I s'pose High Keerd Hurrab's in it?"

"You are right. Since being baffled in his plot against Jacktown and defeated and driven out of Jasper City,* High Card Harry has struck me a blow for revenge. With the aid of Saul Spot, the Pistol Dead-Shot, a wretch as unprincipled and as dangerous as himself, he succeeded in kidnapping Ione while we were on our journey eastward. If she is still alive, she is in his power at this moment."

"Dad-burn his skin!" exploded the vagabond.

"An' is he in these yere parts?"

"I believe High Card Harry is none other than Captain Marvel, chief of the outlaws who have lately appeared in this vicinity."

"I'll bet ye're right, Violets!"

"I feel almost certain I am. If so, the man has reached his right position at last, for he was cut out for a desperado and robber."

"But ther critter's smart enough so 't be hain't ter be coughed at nary time."

"That is true. He is a desperate and powerful man and not a common rascal, by any means. If he had been able to control the supply of liquor which his followers received at Jasper City, he might have come out triumphant in that contest. We have some very difficult work before us."

"But you're ther lads fer it, an' I'm with ye through thick an' thin. We'll make er spankin', ole team, bet yer socks! I'm boun' ter be one o' ther posy galoots. I know ther lay o' ther lan' roun' Red Hot, for this wuz my ole stampin', groun' at one time, so I may be able ter make myself putty derned vallyable."

"That is true, and as you know both High Card Harry and Saul the Spotter, I want you to watch for them. I fancy they will disguise themselves, and to this fact I attribute the greatest danger. If they meet us openly, we would know just what to do, but as it is, the very ones who seem the most friendly may be our foes in disguise."

"Thet's Gospel," agreed Old Sunflower.

Vane continued:

"I am almost certain I espied Saul Spot when we first appeared in the Happy-Go-Lucky Saloon, but he instantly mingled with the crowd and disappeared. I searched every face closely

*See Beadle's Half-Dime Library "Violet Vane, the Velvet Sport" and "Violet Vane's Victory," Nos. 629 and 663.

afterwards, but met nothing but disappointment."

"Ef he saw ye, yer enemies will know you're hyer."

"We made no attempt to conceal our coming from them. At first, we contemplated disguising ourselves, but finally decided on the plan we carried out, more than half expecting our foes would make an immediate assault on us. In that we were disappointed. They were too crafty to play into our hands unless they were behind the trouble with the red-headed bully, which I hardly believe true."

"Waal, we'll guy these critters a rustlin' as they won't soon fergit. We'll form er league erg'in' them—the League o' ther Posy Sports is w'at we'll call it. Ef ther town o' Red Hot d'n't witness er ginoowine ole-fashioned racket afore it's much older, I'll sell my ole head fer er foot-ball, amen!"

Silently the three men shook hands, and thus the compact against villainy was formed.

Suddenly there was a crash and jingle of broken glass, and through the window into the room came a missile of some kind, striking and extinguishing the candle on the little table before the trio.

"Great jeeswax!" gasped Old Sunflower, falling over backward with a crash in his amazement and alarm.

Both Violet Vane and Daisy Dare instantly drew their revolvers and stole cautiously toward the window through which the missile had come.

"They're onto us," whispered Vane.

"Yes, they know we're here," replied the Daisy Sport.

They reached the window just in time to see a dark figure disappearing around the corner of a neighboring building.

"Too late!" exclaimed Vane, in vexation and disappointment.

"Bumshells an' boomerangs!" growled the sunflower tramp, who had crept across the floor to the window, a huge revolver in each hand. "W'y didn't ther critter wait tell I c'u'd 'a' got er crack at him!"

"I wonder what it was that came through the window?" said the yellow-haired sport.

"We can soon discover by lighting the candle again," suggested the violet dandy.

"Ef ye're goin' ter strike er glim, I reckon we'd best pull ther shutters," observed Old Sunflower. "With er light in this room, we'd make elegant targets fur sumbody outside ter practice at."

But, regardless of danger, Daisy Dare struck a match, found the candle and lighted it.

The missile proved to be a round stone about as large as a hen's egg, to which was attached a slip of paper. There was writing on the paper, and when it was smoothed out, Dare read aloud:

"Poor fools! you have come to your doom! We have lured you to Red Hot that we might destroy you, and within forty-eight hours you will both be dead."

YOUR DEADLY FOES."

CHAPTER VI.

FOUL PLOTTING.

GROWLING like the animals for which they were named, swearing bitter oaths against the Posy Pards, the Bulldogs stumbled through the darkness toward the hut where they ate and slept, but which they did not honor by the name of "home."

"Satan seize 'em!" snarled Red Hutch. "I'll yet wipe this score out in blood!"

"An' I'll holp ye," declared his companion.

"You'll holp me!" sneered the furious ruffian. "Yes you will—in a horn! You're er great critter ter holp—you be!"

"Now w'at yer blowin' at?"

"At you, dad-burn ye! You hain't ter be pended on, else them dandy doods w'u'd 'a' bin salted fer plantin' long afore this. Thet's straight."

"W'at d'yer mean, onnyhow?"

"Jest w'at I say. Ef you'd piled in w'en them little runts wuz pokin' it ter me, we'd closed out their count in mighty short order; but you laid back like ye wuz scart an' never so much ez lifted yer little finger. I s'pose you'd 'a' stud thar an' see'd them blamed whelps wipe me out!"

"Now ye know I w'u'dn't 'a' done ary sick thing. I didn't pile in fer one reason 'cause you hev sed you didn't want me ter putt my fingers in your broth, an' fer another, 'cause I thought you oughter handle ther little whelps alone."

"Oh, thet'll do fer talk, but I reckon thar wuz other reasons. Ye can't shut my eye."

"All right; hev it jest ez ye derned please. But I'll say this, I'm with ye hands, hoofs and barks ter down them thar posy galoots."

"Ef ye'd only hopped inter ther ring w'en I wuz gittin' ther wu'st—"

"I'd hed hafe ther gang on me. No, thankee; I laid back an' thought of another day."

They soon came to a slab shanty on the outskirts of the town. Black Hutch opened the door and they entered. A few moments later a smoking lamp dimly illumined the interior of the hut, revealing Red Hutch washing the blood from his face while his comrade sat smoking beside a large square box which served them as a table. The open door swung silently at the play of the light night breeze.

Red Hutch continued to growl and swear as his hands passed over his cut and swollen face.

"A pretty pictur I'll cut!" he snapped. "I'll look wuss'n ef I'd bin kicked in ther jaw by er muel! Ther dogs'll stop ter bark at me w'en I go 'long ther street! Oh, it'll be er mighty long day afore I fergit this business!"

"I tolle ye w'at ther Spotter sed afore ye tried ter climb 'em," asserted Black Hutch, pulling vigorously at the pipe.

"I know that; but who'd 'a' thought ther little devils w'u'd 'a' hed ther bottom in them? They kim in thar ter play that very game. May I be sunk in ther Bottomless Pit ef I don't hev er sweet revenge fer this yere piece of business?"

"Then you are the very man I am looking for."

With startled oaths, both of the Bulldogs wheeled toward the open door where stood the speaker, their hands dropping upon the butts of convenient revolvers. But they did not draw a weapon, for clear and distinct came the command:

"Slow and easy, pard's! Keep your hands empty! You will observe I have you lined."

Which was true. The flaring light fell full upon the polished revolvers in the hands of the tall and shapely man who stood in the doorway, and at a glance the bullies saw they were under the muzzles of the weapons, which never quivereded in the grasp of their owner.

The man's dark, handsome face was shaved smoothly and there was a set expression about the mouth that told he was in the habit of having his own way to a great extent and would be a very unpleasant person to oppose in anything. His black eyes were keen and piercing. His clothes were a careless mixture of cowboy and citizen attire.

The Bulldogs saw their visitor meant business, and their hands fell from their weapons.

"Who in blazes are you?" demanded Black Hutch.

"A friend," was the reply.

"Blamed ef I 'member ever settin' eyes on ye afore."

"Perhaps you do not; still I am your friend, providing I understood the conversation that passed between you two gentlemen just before I bobbed up serenely. I believe you were swear-ing vengeance against two velvet-attired pimps who call themselves Violet Vane and Daisy Dare?"

"Wal, w'at ef we wuz?"

"Then I say we are friends, for I have no particular love for the parties mentioned."

"Wal, who are ye, onnyhow?"

"High Card Harry is the handle I sail under."

"Never heerd of ye."

"Likely not, but all the same I am a lad to tie to, especially in a rustle against the velvet ga-loots who call themselves the Posy Pards."

"Then ye don't love 'em?"

"Not any to speak of."

"Is this straight?"

"Straight as a string. I am here to make a bargain with you. I will pay you well to work for me against the velvet dandies."

"Then we're ther ga-loots ye're lookin' fer. We're ready ter work erg'in' ther little imps of deception, an' ef we kin meek er dollar a-doin' of it, 'course we won't refuse."

High Card Harry instantly lowered his weapons.

"That is business," he nodded, advancing boldly into the room. "It is plain you gent's know which side your bread is buttered on. I can fill your fins with dollars and give you revenge on the Posy Pards at the same time."

"Cust ef I don't like your talk!" cried Red Hutch. "Jest you look at this yere beaucherful mug of mine. Hain't it a sight fer sinners? Wal, I hev them little whelps of Satan ter thank fer it, an' ye kin understan' w'y I don't love 'em mutch."

"I saw the whole affair from a point where the one who calls himself Violet Vane could not see me," declared the gambler from Jasper City. "He has followed me here, and for various reasons, I prefer to keep shady for the present."

"Hain't skeered of him, are ye?" grinned Black Hutch, insinuatingly.

Harry's dark face crimsoned.

"No, I am not," he declared. "I have been engaged in two battles with him, and to be honest, I must confess he was the victor both times; yet I fear him no more than I would a snapping cur. But if we meet, it will be a battle to the death, and that is just what I wish to avoid. I do not wish to kill him, but I want to get him into my power. Do you understand?"

The twin Bulldogs nodded together.

"To accomplish my object I am willing to put out a good round sum of money," continued Harkman. "If you take the job of roping the Pards, I will pay you well."

"But I thought it wuz only one ye cared fer?"

"And you were right; but I have a friend who wishes to get his hands on the other. I will call him in and we will form our plans and settle the terms."

He stepped to the door and, placing his fingers between his lips, blew a shrill blast. In a few minutes the signal was answered by the appearance of a person who slipped quickly into the hut and closed the door promptly behind him. At the same time High Card Harry picked up a blanket and hung it in front of the small window, so no one could look in from the outside.

The Bulldogs saw the latest arrival wore a mask over his face, and was attired entirely in black, but when he turned toward them, after closing the door, they uttered exclamations of amazement, for on the breast of the blouse-like waist which he wore were large white letters forming the words:

"Captain Marvel."

The notorious robber and desperado who had lately begun operations in the vicinity of Red Hot stood before them! He was a man somewhat below medium height, and an observer would have said that, divested of mask and black attire, he would not be the person to attract a second look in a crowd. When he spoke, his voice was singularly smooth and pleasant, but there was a firmness about it which told he was in the habit of commanding—and being obeyed.

"Now," said Harry Harkman, as he turned from the window, "we can talk business. I have sounded these gents, and I find they are ready and willing to aid us."

"Good!" exclaimed Captain Marvel, crisply, taking a seat on a convenient box and assuming a position that enabled him to command a view of the entire interior of the cabin and be quite near the door.

"As I informed you," added the gambler, "they have good cause to hate the velvet dandies. If you do not think so, take a look at the face of that one there," pointing at Red Hutch.

The red-headed ruffian snarled out an oath and brought his clinched fist down on the big box with a resounding thump.

"I'd like ter twist ther necks of both!" he asserted.

The bandit chief rubbed his gloved hands together with satisfaction.

"That sounds well," he nodded. "You are the very men we want, for you will have a double object to work for—revenge and money. But as far as your revenge is concerned, you must be satisfied in delivering these two men into our hands. We will pledge our word that they shall both die."

At this both of the Bulldogs looked disappointed.

"We'd like the priverlege of seein' 'em snuffed out," Black Hutch ventured to say.

"Which is asking too much," said Captain Marvel, promptly.

"Wal, then we kin do ther job ourselves," growled Red Hutch.

"And lose a fat pot," sneered the outlaw. "If you are men of good common sense, you will not do that. See here!"

He produced a roll of bills and quietly counted out two lots of fifty dollars each.

"Now," he added, "the moment you agree to do your level best to carry out our instructions and aid us in getting the Posy Pards into our power this money is yours. We pay you this amount in advance to bind the bargain. Then if you are successful, we will pay you double the sum when we have them safe and alive. Now is it a trade? Speak lively, for I have little time to squander here."

The ruffians hesitated but an instant. The sight of the money was too much for them, and they yielded.

"Guy us ther cash an' we'll do our level best," they said.

Captain Marvel instantly pushed the bills toward them, and the money was greedily snapped up.

"That point is settled," observed the bandit chief. "Now we will form our plans. We must all work in unison against these velvet pards, who, I assure you, are two hard men to deal with. Your work will be far from boys' play."

"You are right," agreed High Card Harry, "our foes are men of heavy caliber despite their size. And let me warn you against the ragged old tramp who turned up at the Happy-Go-Lucky to-night and called himself Old Sunflower. He will be hand and glove with the Posy Pards; I know him of old. If you can get a chance, do not hesitate about sending a bullet through him, for the sooner he is out of the way the better."

"We'll fix him," asserted Black Hutch.

Then the four villains began laying their plans against the Posy Pards, and for more than an hour they were thus engaged, little dreaming that at a certain chink in the wall a pair of dancing, bead-like eyes were watching every move, and a sharp ear was strained to catch their words.

When the door opened for High Card Harry and Captain Marvel to pass out into the darkness, a rounded figure squirmed with a snake-like motion round a corner of the hut, but they saw it not.

CHAPTER VII.

THE ROBBER LIEUTENANT.

WITHIN a long, narrow and almost inaccessible valley far up amid the mountains, a little more than a dozen miles from Red Hot, was the lately chosen retreat of Captain Marvel's marauders. The place had been well selected, for its seclusion was such it would not be readily discovered, and could be easily defended. There the robbers had pitched their tents and were making preparations for winter.

Through the valley ran a tiny mountain stream that was born in a cool spring within the recesses of a cave at the upper end of the vale. At that end the valley was unapproachable, being hemmed in by rugged and unscalable bluffs. The mouth of the cave was twenty feet above the level of the valley, and the stream fell in a tiny cascade over the jagged, mossy rocks. A narrow and somewhat difficult path led up to a moss-covered cliff near the opening of the cave.

Upon this cliff, reclining on the moss beside the tiny stream near the point where it fell over the rocks into the valley below, were two young ladies, scarcely more than girls in years. They were idly watching the scene below them, where the outlaws were erecting some rude cabins for winter occupation.

Both of the girls were far more than ordinarily attractive in appearance, one being a brunette and the other a blonde. They represented two distinct types of feminine beauty, and it would have been a singular man indeed who would have pronounced neither of them handsome.

The face of the dark-haired girl was a trifle sad in expression, but the look did not mar her beauty in the least—indeed, it seemed to give it a peculiar charm. She was to all appearance gazing down into the valley, but a close observer would have seen a far-away vacant look in her large dark eyes which indicated she really saw nothing that was transpiring below. Her thoughts were far away.

This was Edna Dare, the wife of the Daisy Sport, who believed she had perished in one of the outlaws, burning buts more than a hundred miles from Red Hot. She had been removed from the cabin by one of her captors, a thing of which the dying outlaw had known nothing. The unfortunate wretch truly believed she had perished in the flames.

It seemed nothing could quite crush the spirits of the merry blue-eyed blonde. For a time she might despair, but she soon recovered and was hopeful—even light-hearted. There was a smile on her red lips as she watched the scene below and listened to the snatch of an old love-song which one of the men was singing as if he were quite light-hearted and the shadow of the fatal noose did not hang over him.

Ione Wilson found much that was romantic and charming about her captivity, and the time did not drag by so slowly and wearily with her as it did with Edna. She felt certain her lover—whom people called Violet Vane—would find and rescue her in time, and so long as the robbers offered her no indignity she could endure her limited liberty very well.

"What a delightful voice that fellow has, Edna!" Ione exclaimed, as the man in the valley ceased to sing.

Edna started as if aroused from a dream.

"What did you say, dear?" she asked.

"There, there!" cried the golden-haired girl, resentfully. "If you haven't been having another one of those spells! My goodness, Edna! you must not brood over your situation so much!"

Edna smiled faintly.

"I cannot help it, dear friend," she replied. "The future looks far from promising. I am afraid we have little to hope for."

"Oh, nonsense! What is the use of moping? I am sure it will all come out right in the end."

"Perhaps so."

"We may as well trust to fortune. It's not going to better the situation to despair over it. I did enough of that at first to suffice for the whole time I'm in this scrape. Your husband will have you out of this before long."

"I truly hope so, but I am not so sure of that. I have been in the power of these wretches much longer than you, and he has not succeeded in rescuing me yet. He may think I am dead."

"Well, if he does think so and he is the kind of a man you have described to me, he will be after these fellows, determined on revenge. I am sure Philip will not rest till I am free, and you are sure of being saved then."

Edna's hand crept into that of her cheerful companion.

"I know not what I should do without you," she said. "You keep my spirits revived."

"Well, then I am good for something even in such a place as this. But look down there, Edna, where those men are at work. Isn't that a pleasant picture?"

"It would be pleasanter if we were not captives here."

"Oh, forget that for the present. You should have heard that fellow singing, but you were dreaming at the time. It was the lieutenant, whose name I have discovered is Frank Fenton. He is a handsome fellow, and it is a shame he is an outlaw."

"That is true. I have noticed him several times. He has always been courteous and kind, and I am sure he was born for a better life than he is leading."

"But there is something romantic and charming about such a life. It's a jolly careless existence."

"Is that the way you look at it? To me it seems anything but jolly and careless. These fellows are living in constant fear of a violent death."

"One of the romantic features of their life," laughed Ione. "They are considerate and polite in their way, and to me they almost seem like robber knights of old. If I were a man, I might be tempted to turn robber if I could be the chief."

A pained light filled Edna's eyes.

"I am sorry to hear you speak so," she said, soberly. "I am sure you hardly realize what you say. It cannot be you admire Captain Marvel?"

"But I do! I think he is fine, and I long for a glimpse of his face. It is strange he keeps so closely masked. Why, not even Lieutenant Fenton has ever seen his face!"

"Who told you that?"

"Mr. Fenton himself."

Edna seemed on the point of speaking, but suddenly compressed her lips and forced back the words which were seeking utterance. For several moments the girls were silent, and in the brains of each strange thoughts were throbbing. Down in the valley the robber lieutenant sung another stanza of the old-time love-song. When it was finished, he looked up toward the cliff and Ione fluttered her snowy handkerchief at him.

"What made you do that?" exclaimed Edna.

"To see if he will not come up," laughed the thoughtless Ione. "I would really like to hear him talk. It would be a treat."

"Well, the indications are you will have that pleasure, for he is coming this way."

Which was true. The young lieutenant had seen Ione's signal and at once turned his steps toward the head of the valley. In a few moments he paused at the foot of the path and, looking upward, called in a pleasant voice:

"May I come up?"

"Of course," Ione instantly replied. "There is plenty of room, and we shall be pleased to have some company to break the monotony."

In a few seconds he joined them, and the laughing girl of the yellow hair invited him to take a seat upon the moss. He flung himself down in a careless, graceful attitude, falling into a position where he could easily watch her face. Edna looked on silently and without approval.

"We were speaking about your singing, Mr. Fenton," said Ione. "It was delightful."

"Thank you," he smiled. "I was not aware I had such charming listeners till I looked this way and caught the flutter of your handkerchief. Otherwise I might not have made such a display of my musical ability."

"Then we are indebted to your ignorance. It is not much we find here to entertain us, and a little snatch of an old song is quite refreshing."

"Even if poorly rendered," laughed Fenton.

He was in truth a handsome fellow, his face having an intellectual cast and his mild brown eyes being frank and honest in expression like those of an innocent girl. It was a wonder he held rank in a gang of lawless men, and this thought passed through Edna's mind as well as Ione's.

Suddenly Edna asked:

"How much longer are we to be held in captivity, Lieutenant Fenton?"

He made an impatient gesture, but replied courteously:

"That I cannot say, Mrs. Dare. Things have taken a turn of late and I am no longer in the confidence of the chief as I once was. Since High Card Harry became one of the band I have been gradually relegated to the background and he has taken my place in power if not in name. Although he is not called so, he is truly Captain Marvel's trusted second officer, and I am—nothing!"

The girls were surprised, for they had been unaware of this silent change of officers.

"And you know nothing of Captain Marvel's plans?"

"Nothing. I am now really fourth in command, for from the first Queen Ada has held as much power as the chief, and now this handsome gambler has stolen my position. Well, it is as good as I deserve, for I should not be here."

"Either that or you should be chief of them all," declared Ione, her eyes glowing. "You are as smart as the best of them, and they have no right—"

She broke off abruptly, crimsoning with confusion, for she had not thought what she was saying. A new light broke over Frank Fenton's face, and he gazed eagerly into her eyes as if trying to fathom the full meaning behind her hasty words. His lips parted, he was about to speak, when the thud of a horse's hoofs came up from the valley and attracted the attention of the three.

Mounted on a powerful clean-limbed horse, the queen of the bandits rode up to the foot of the cliff, looking a very queen indeed, for she was a perfect horsewoman, sitting easily in the saddle and moving with the horse as if glued to the animal.

"Helloa there, Lieutenant Fenton!" she bailed in a clear, strong voice, looking upward toward the three figures on the cliff. "I will warn you Captain Marvel is liable to arrive at any moment. It might prove unpleasant if he saw you in your present company."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE LIEUTENANT'S LOVE.

FENTON flushed and a look of anger flashed across his handsome face. His brown eyes glowed strangely as he watched the robber queen ride slowly away.

"What did she mean by that?" asked Ione, wonderingly.

"That I had better move," he answered, laughing shortly. "She knows Captain Marvel has an eye for feminine beauty."

"But—but I do not understand."

"It is really embarrassing for me to speak plainer. It cannot be you are blind."

Edna was quicker to comprehend than Ione.

"Surely he does not dare!" she exclaimed.

"Captain Marvel dares anything," asserted the lieutenant. "He is a man who will stop at nothing to gain his ends."

A blush suffused Ione's cheeks and her blue eyes shone strangely, as she faltered:

"Oh, it cannot be! That woman must have been jesting!"

Fenton arose.

"I fear you may find it more than a jest. I am sorry for you."

For a few moments the features of the golden-haired girl betrayed a strange mingling of emotions. Edna watched her friend with a feeling of pain, fear and suspense bearing heavily on her heart. At length, Ione broke into a merry laugh, exclaiming:

"The bride of a bandit chief! That would be romantic indeed! There are things many times more dreadful."

Edna uttered a little cry of dismay, and the lieutenant turned swiftly toward the thoughtless blonde, a look of eagerness on his face, a new light in his eyes.

"Is that the way you look at it?" he asked, his voice a trifle hoarse and unnatural.

"Of course it is!" laughed Ione.

"But you do not care for Captain Marvel?"

"Care for him? No more than I care for you. I have one lover, that is quite enough for the present."

"Would you escape from this place if you had a chance?"

"What a silly question! To be sure I would."

Lieutenant Fenton was silent a moment; then, glancing around as if fearful of being overheard, he said, in a low, distinct voice:

"Meet me an hour after dark to-night at the base of this waterfall. I have something of importance to say to you—something concerning your freedom. What I have to say is for you alone to hear. Will you come?"

Ione seemed to hesitate for a few moments, and Edna was on the point of speaking, when the fair-haired girl replied:

"I will come."

"You will not regret it," assured Fenton.

Lifting his hat, he bowed politely to both of the girls, then descended to the valley below.

"Ione, you are rash!" exclaimed Edna, when the lieutenant had departed.

A look of mingled coaxing and defiance settled on the pretty face of the golden-haired girl.

"Now don't preach!" she entreated. "You trust in me. It will all come out right in the end."

"I fear you will get yourself disastrously entangled."

"There is no danger."

But the troubled look did not leave Edna's face.

"How can you say that? It cannot be you understand the real danger."

"You will see. I am playing a little game, and if it works right, we will gain our liberty by it."

"And if it works wrong?"

"We will not be a bit worse off than we are at present."

Mrs. Dare was silenced for a moment, but not convinced. After a time she ventured to say:

"But you are deceiving Lieutenant Fenton." Ione laughed merrily.

"All's fair in love and war," she replied. "We are prisoners of war, you know."

Edna made a gesture of helplessness.

"I see I can say nothing to change your determination. All I can do is trust to your good judgment."

Ione clasped Edna in her arms and kissed her.

"That is right," she said. "I promise you now that I will be discreet. My one object shall be our interest in escaping."

Lieutenant Fenton had waited at the appointed place of meeting at least thirty minutes that night before Ione appeared. She came cautiously forward and he spoke her name. In another moment they met and he drew her into the deep shadow of the cliff.

"There is not much danger of being detected here," he said, speaking in a low tone.

Ione was nervous, and her voice shook a little as she replied:

"I ought not to have come."

"Do not say that!" came earnestly from his lips. "Your coming may prove the best thing that could occur. I am interested in you and will do my best to aid you."

"Thank you. You are kind."

"But I have a selfish motive," he confessed, his voice faltering and betraying his emotion and embarrassment, despite the fact that darkness almost entirely concealed the workings of his face.

Ione was silent. His hand sought and found hers in the darkness. She made a feeble attempt to draw it away, but he would not release it.

"Listen!" he boarsely whispered, his lips close to her ear, his hot breath on her cheek. "I have a secret. I had thought to keep it concealed in my heart, never to allow it to rise to my lips; but some words you spoke to-day gave me courage to unveil it to you. I am amazed at my own boldness, for I fully understand my position and how disadvantageously I must stand in your pure eyes. I am an outlaw—a companion of bandits—more, one of the leading men of a band of lawless men."

"Stop!" she exclaimed, guardedly. "You were never intended for such a position. If fate has been unkind to you, I am sure it was by no fault of yours."

She felt the hand that held hers shake like that of a strong man stirred by some powerful emotion.

"It is good of you to say that," he declared, with deep feeling. "And it is the truth. I was always honest till convicted by the law of a crime I never committed. I escaped imprisonment, but with a black brand on my name and the constant dread of legal punishment for another's sin hanging over me. I was an outlaw in name; was it strange I became one in act?"

"I do not condemn you."

He drew still closer, but she put a hand against his breast and held him away. He went on, impulsively:

"Your words about becoming the bride of a bandit chief gave me some hope, for I thought perhaps you did not regard me with so much loathing as you might. I will speak frankly. I love you, Lone Wilson! Do not interrupt me—listen! I have loved you since the first moment my eyes fell on your face! That is God's truth! Not only have I loved you, but I have worshipped you in secret. You knew nothing of it, for I tried to smother what I considered a hopeless passion in the depths of my heart. I did succeed in concealing the truth, but I could not crush and extinguish my love. It grew stronger day by day, till it seemed those around me must read my secret on my face. At one time I thought of going away—of leaving the band and putting hundreds of miles between us. But I could not do so—I could not tear myself away. What folly! when you did not even dream of my love, and might never care for me if you knew all. I thought thus a thousand times, but it made not a particle of difference. You were still my queen—my angel of all loveliness and purity! To-day for the first time I have dared entertain hope. Now it seems as if life will be but a barren desert without you. If you will fly with me from this place and become my wife, I will do anything you ask. In Mexico we can live happily together and the dread of the law will not hang over me."

He stopped speaking abruptly and she was silent as if thinking. He dared not break the silence, but he ventured to pass his arm around her supple waist, an act which she did not appear to notice. After a time, she said:

"But if I agree to all this—mind you I have not—but if I should, how are we to escape? Captain Marvel has every point of exit from this valley closely guarded."

"He thinks he has, but I know a secret way of leaving. Captain Marvel has never thoroughly explored the cave from which this water comes."

"What do you mean?"

"That there is a passage that leads to another opening. We can enter the cave here and come out far, far away. I know the passage thoroughly."

"And you will guide Edna and myself through the passage—"

"If you will promise to become my wife. Captain Marvel will soon discover what has happened and be after us, thirsting for my blood; but for your sake I will dare anything—I will prove a traitor to my chief, who has already given my position to another, and thus acted traitorously toward me."

"But would it not be better for you to remain behind so no suspicion would fall upon you? You can leave the band afterward. You can give me such directions that we can find our way through the cave."

"No, no! that would never do! You would lose your way and perish in the dark, damp passages. There is but one way—I must go with you. Do not think of attempting it alone, for you would surely perish in the cave. If you remain here, Captain Marvel may take a notion to make you his wife. I think he contemplates such a thing. Your only resource is to trust in me. My little darling! say you care for me the least bit—say you will be my wife! You must—you shall!"

He drew her closer and would have kissed her. His fierce love frightened her, and she felt as if she had made a mistake in allowing him so much liberty, even though she had done so with a wild hope of escaping from the clutch of Captain Marvel. When he tried to kiss her she exerted all her strength and broke away, panting:

"No, no, no! That is too much—now. This is unexpected. I can make no promise now, but I will see you again.—See! some one is approaching there! I must not be seen with you, it would ruin all!"

And with no other word, she fled away in the darkness, leaving him unsatisfied, disappointed, shaken by doubt, yet cheered by a gleam of hope.

CHAPTER IX.

THE BULLDOGS SEEK SATISFACTION.

A HUNDRED dollars in cash was a large sum for the Bulldogs to possess, and the following day after obtaining that amount they appeared on Red Hot's principal street in a state of hilarious intoxication. The fiery liquor had driven all memory of their bargain with High Card Harry and the robber captain from their heads, and their only thought was to find the Posy Pards and wipe out the disgrace which they imagined the sports had heaped upon them.

"Whoop!" bellowed Red Hutch, whose ugly face was fearfully disfigured by cuts and bruises. "We are ther high cocks of ther walk! Whar is ther little no-count rats as calls themselves ther Posy Pards? We want ter git at 'em. Let 'em show themselves ef they durst crawl out of their hoels."

"Oh, go bury that face!" yelled the strong voice of Old Sunflower, but the tramp did not exhibit himself to the eyes of the drunken ruffians.

"Any one of us kin lick the Posy Pards with one han' tied ahint our backs," continued the boastful bully. "They played foul las' night, an' we kin prove it ef they durst show up. Whar are ther bantams as made sich er spread? Ef we git at 'em they'll think they're struck by lightnin'."

"What is all this row about?" demanded a firm, quiet voice, and Old Sunflower gave a shout of delight as Daisy Dare appeared.

"Jehucus! won't thar be er circus now!" he laughed.

"Thar's one of 'em!" howled Red Hutch, while his comrade gave vent to a string of furious oaths. Together they rushed toward the Daisy Sport.

"Let me git at him! I'll paralyze him!" roared the ruffian of the bruised face.

"Bet er clean thousan' dollars ag'in' ten cents ye think er double-an'-twisted all-wool-an'-er-yard-wide cyclone hes struck ye ef ye go foolin' roun' thar ther leetle bundle o' condensed dynamite," shouted the wearer of the sunflower.

"Hold on therel!" said Dare, firmly, lifting his cane with a gesture of warning. "If you fellows have any business with me make it known."

"Oh, we've got business with ye!" sneered Black Hutch. "You will be mighty ap' ter fine thar out afore we're done with ye. We mean ter completely knock ther packin' out of ye."

At this the little sport actually smiled.

"Laff, blast ye!" shouted Red Hutch, tearing off the coat which he wore that day and flinging it down in the dust. "In erbout two-an'-a-hafe shakes I'll meck ye laff out of t'other corner of yer mouth. Look at this yere face of mine."

"Looks like er remarkably bad map o' Injun Territory," observed Old Sunflower. "Toar are maount'ins an' valleys an' rivers an' canyons an' all thar sort o' thing all painted in diffrunt colors jest ez I've seen 'em in Joggerfrys. Say, how much'll you take fer that face an' sell it fer cash? Putt it up at auction."

"Wait tell I'm done with this yere little runt then I'll punch ther jaw offen you," snarled the red-bearded giant, casting a baleful glare at the old tramp.

"Shucks!" sneered the unsuppressible old fellow. "W'en you are done with ther Daisy frum Denver you'll be ready ter sell yerself fer soap-grease."

Black Hutch had also removed his coat.

"Whar's t'other little runt?" he demanded.

"We want ter do ther hull job ter once."

"You are both drunk," asserted Daisy Dare, "and you had better go take a snooze before you pick a fuss with any one. In your present condition, I can lick you both with my hands tied behind me."

The Bulldogs uttered howls of rage and surprise.

"Hyer thar!" shouted Red Hutch.

"Dern his skin!" roared the black ruffian.

"Oh, he kin do it," nodded Old Sunflower, grinning from ear to ear.

"Do you want ter fight us both?" eagerly asked the red-bearded bully.

Dare shook his head.

"I have no desire to fight either of you."

"But ye can't git out of it; ye've got ter fight."

"But the odds will be against you."

"Wat, with us two outer you?"

"Yes."

Both of the Twin Bulldogs broke into a roar of derisive laughter.

"Did ye ever hear ther like of that?" howled Black Hutch.

"Derned ef I don't believe he's tryin' ter skeer us!" sneered the other ruffian.

"But he's got ter fight."

"You bet."

"Will you agree to use no weapons but those nature gave you?" asked the Daisy Sport.

"Course we will."

"We only want ter punch ye silly."

"And you will not draw a knife or revolver?"

"No."

Dare motioned to Old Sunflower.

"Please tie my hands together behind me," he requested.

Exclamations of amazement came from the crowd.

"Ye don't mean it, leetle pard!" gasped the astonished tramp.

"But I do."

"Yer are goin' ter fight both o' them critters with yer han's tied?"

"Yes."

The Bulldogs looked at each other in drunken astonishment.

"We don't want none of that!" they cried.

"We hain't foolin'," assured Red Hutch.

"And you will discover I am not," smiled Dare.

"But you can't fight with yer han's tied like that."

"Can't I? Well, wait and see."

"Twon't be no fun a tall," moaned the black tough. "We kin jest knock ye roun' ary way we like. I'm hyer fer fun."

"And I promise you all you want before you are through with me," said the sport, calmly. "You are both pretty drunk, and I have no desire to take an advantage of your condition."

"Good Lawd!"

"Thet gits me!"

At this moment Major Mars approached the crowd.

"What is the excitement?" he inquired.

He was quickly informed of the singular struggle about to take place, and his astonishment knew no bounds.

"You are very foolhardy, sar!" he exclaimed, hastening to Dare's side. "Those rascals are the worst men in camp; they have neither honor or conscience. When they get you at such an advantage they will surely do their best to pound the life out of your body. I beg you use some judgment!"

"I thank you, sir, for your evident interest," said Dare, quietly, almost coldly. "But I assure you I am not so much of a fool as you may think. I know quite well what I am doing."

"And you will fight them in such a manner?"

"I shall, sir."

The major made a gesture of protestation.

"I beg you alter your determination. I almost feel it my duty to interfere."

"If you do so, you will make me your enemy."

"Better keep yer fingers out o' ther soup, genral," advised Old Sunflower, who was tying the little sport's hands as requested. "Daisy knows w'at he's erbout, bet yer shirt."

The old soldier fell back as if offended somewhat.

"Come, hurry up thar!" cried Red Hutch.

"We're acchin' ter git at our mutton."

"An' you'll soon be acchin' ter git out o' this vicinity," grinned the sunflower tramp. "Bet ye'll soon be wishin' you'd lived an' died a couple or three hundred y'ars ergo."

At Dare's request, Old Sunflower held the sport's hat and cane.

"But they don't hinder my handlin' er resolver," he said. "I'm goin' ter see fair play or bore something. Ef one o' them thar Bulldogs draws er knife or a resolver, I'll fill him so full o' lead he'd sink er raft."

"Are ye ready?" demanded Red Hutch.

"All ready," was the reply.

With shouts of delight, the bullies staggered toward the little man, thinking to seize and crush him at the first onset. But Dare did not wait for them. With the agility of a squirrel he dodged their outstretched arms and slipped round behind them, tripping Red Hutch as he passed. Before the black ruffian could turn he received a kick that fairly lifted him off his feet, and caused him to fall on his hands and knees.

"Oh, holy jumpin' up jeeswax!" laughed Old Sunflower. "Will ye looker thar! Say, pard, w'at ye down thar fer—prayin'?"

As Red Hutch struggled to his feet he also felt the boot of the Daisy Sport, and, although he did not lose his footing, he was sent bounding ahead several feet. Before he could whirl after his feet touched the ground, he received another

kick in the same place, and was sent onward again. This was repeated several times, till it seemed as if the bully was running away and Dare was assisting him in his flight in a manner more forcible than pleasant. The bully's long arms waved wildly in the air, and he uttered a grunt and a curse at every kick.

"Hole on, hole on!" shouted the wearer of the sunflower, as he fairly doubled up and laughed till it seemed as if he would lose his breath. "Hole on, Reddy! W'at in blue blazes ye runnin' off like that fer? Come back h'ver an' git at yer mutton. Oh, good Jimminy Christmas! I am afraid I'll never recover from this!"

But Black Hutch was on his feet and rushing toward the deceptive dandy, his face like a storm-cloud. Dare whirled when the black bully was within ten feet of him and coming with a rush.

"Now I've got ye, dern—"

He never finished the exclamation. Down went the Daisy Sport's head and the bully's rush carried him fairly astride the little man's neck. The next moment Dare shot upward and Black Hutch was hurled headlong to the ground, where he lay like one stunned.

A shout of admiration came from the surprised spectators.

"Whoop-ee!" squealed Old Sunflower, in delight. "I knowed it! That's ther kind o'er lulu that boy is! Oh, he's er howlin' horror from Hot Hill!"

"That is wonderful!" exclaimed Major Mars, rubbing his hands together with apparent satisfaction and enjoyment. "Nothing but seeing this astonishing spectacle could have convinced me one man with his hands tied behind him would prove a match for those two ruffians. Wonderful, wonderful!"

Swearing furiously, Red Hutch turned back to continue the fight. He rushed toward the sport, and Daisy Dare, with a new change of tactics, ran as if to meet him. The spectators caught their breath expecting a violent collision, but just as Hutch stretched out his long arms expecting to grasp his little foe in another moment, the graceful figure of the sport shot into the air with a magnificent spring.

A great shout came from the crowd as they saw Daisy Dare sail fairly over the lowered head of his huge foe. Lightly as a cat the supple sport landed on his feet, ran on a few steps, then whirled back.

"What ungodly sight is this mine eyes are led to rest upon!" cried a droning, sing-song voice, as Parson Plank suddenly appeared and pushed his way through the crowd. "Oh, wicked men, unthinking, sinful souls! The door of perdition is yawning wi-ideley for you! My love is open even for the sinful, and I would fold you in my arms and bear you from the wi-i de road to destruction."

With this he clasped the Daisy Sport in his arms just as Red Hutch drew a shining knife and leaped straight toward the little dandy, venting a savage shout of joy.

CHAPTER X.

DAISY DARE'S CLOSE CALL.

"Look out there!" shouted Major Mars, flinging himself forward with a hand outstretched toward the murderous-minded bully. "He has a knife!"

But it was useless to tell the Daisy Sport that, for Dare was already aware of the fact. But what could he do? His hands were tied behind him and he was held motionless ready for the knife by the strong arms of the singular parson. He seemed helpless to aid himself.

But Old Sunflower had not forgotten his pledge to shoot either of the bullies if they played foul. At the same time, it happened that the tramp was prevented from keeping his word for the reason that, in springing forward in his vain effort to stop the murderous stroke, Major Mars had placed himself between Old Sunflower and the ruffian with the knife.

"Now you die!" yelled the furious ruffian, making a last spring toward Dare and striking out viciously.

But at that very instant the sport made a powerful surge to one side and whirled Parson Plank fairly in front of the would-be murderer's weapon.

Then came a cry of pain and the strong arms which had held Dare ready for assassination relaxed their grasp, the parson sinking to the ground, pressing his hand to his side.

Red Hutch seemed stupefied at the deed he had done and stood staring down at the wounded man.

But Daisy Dare did not remain long inactive. With a powerful wrench he broke the cords which held his hands, then he leaped forward,

his hard right fist darting out straight from the shoulder and striking with a smack on Red Hutch's jaw just below the left ear, and the brutal wretch was hurled headlong to the ground.

"Whooppee!" shouted Old Sunflower. "Can't play rats on that boy, an' it's no use ter try. He allus comes out clean chuck top o' ther heap."

"This is very unfortunate—very!" exclaimed Major Mars, hastening to the side of the fallen parson. "How badly are you hurt, sar?"

A groan was the only reply.

"Some one go for Doctor Rasp," commanded the old soldier. "I am afraid this man is fatally wounded."

"That's w'at he gits by stickin' his fingers in other people's soup," nodded the sunflower tramp. "Ef he'd a' had his way, ther leetle Daisy w'u'd bin punctuated."

"I do not think he meant anything wrong," said the major. "And it is very unfortunate that he received the stab intended for another."

"Do you blame me?" coldly demanded Daisy Dare.

"Not in the least, my dear sar. You were forced to do something to defend—or, properly speaking, to save yourself. Under similar circumstances, I might have done the same. You are in no way responsible."

The sport bowed, a slight smile curling his mustached lip.

"If the man is what he appears, I certainly regret the occurrence," he said. "But I have a fancy he is no more a parson than I am."

Major Mars looked startled and astounded, and exclamations of surprise broke from the bystanders.

"W'at are ye drivin' at, Daisy?" asked Old Sunflower.

"Just this: I think that pretended parson is an enemy in disguise."

At this point the wounded man uttered a hollow groan of pain.

"You may be right," admitted the major; "but we are not doing our duty to stand in this manner while he may be bleeding to death. I will—"

"Hold a moment, major," and the Daisy Sport stepped in front of the old soldier. "My first desire is to set my mind at rest concerning one point. If this man is truly an enemy, I want to know it. When I have satisfied myself, you may do whatever you think best for him. The doctor should soon be on the spot."

Dare bent over the man and fumbled a moment with the white beard. The wounded man's eyes had been closed, but as he felt the sport's light fingers, they opened slowly and became fixed on the face bending over him, while a low curse came from his lips.

"Beaten again!" he groaned, bitterly. "It must be Satan aids you, for you were fairly within my power. You are like the one who calls you his pard. My blow at you was to reach him, for I have no personal grudge against you. But I reckon I have got it for good."

The white beard proved to be false, for it came away in the sport's hands, revealing a smoothly-shaved face, stern and relentless, but marked with an expression of great agony. Old Sunflower gave a cry of amazement.

"Holy jeehocus!" he shouted. "Ef 'tain't Saul ther Spotter may I be jiggered!"

A glance showed Dare the wounded man was a stranger to him.

Major Mars turned on the tramp, demanding:

"Who is Saul the Spotter, sar?"

"A b-a-a-d man, bet yer boots! He hates Violet Vane wuss'n p'ison! 'Cause why? 'Cause Sweet Violets knocked him clean out in er leetle game he an' a feller called High Keerd Harry wuz playin'. Thet wuz over in Jasper City, an' both ther Spotter an' High Keerd wuz 'scorted ter ther latter eend o' ther town an' invited ter skip-slide—amble—skin out. They wuz told they w'u'd be presented with er necktie free o' charge w'en they returned, but they never kem back ter claim it."

"And so this man did his best to aid in my murder because Violet Vane is my pard?" said Dare.

"Reckon that's w'at he did," nodded the wearer of the sunflower.

"Then he received no more than he deserved," was the opinion of Major Mars. "But for all that, it is our duty to attend to his injuries now. It would not be right to let him bleed to death before our eyes."

Dare bowed.

"That is true, sir; it is plainly our duty to do what we can to save him for the hangman's noose."

At this moment Doctor Rasp, a portly, important-looking man, arrived and made his way to the side of the unlucky schemer.

"Ah-a! cut in the side, eb? No place to examine it here—no place at all. Sun beats down hot enough to roast a man. Somebody clear out this crowd—be lively! Man can't catch his breath, and I do not wonder. Here, you men, lift him easily as possible and carry him to the shade there. Make way! make way, I say!"

The doctor's commands were rapidly obeyed. Just as Saul the Spotter was being lifted from the ground, a great cry came from the crowd, for Red Hutch was seen running down the street, plainly with the idea of escaping punishment for his deed.

"Stop him!"

"Shoot him!"

"Don't let him escape!"

With these cries, two-thirds of the crowd started after the fleeing Bulldog. But Red Hutch had already obtained an advantageous start, and the bullets which came whistling about his ears simply added speed to his feet. Once he turned and sent back a yell of defiance.

Daisy Dare stood with a grim smile on his face watching the fugitive till Red Hutch disappeared behind a building far down the street. The sport seemed quite indifferent, concerning the result of the chase.

The fugitive Bulldog quickly reappeared mounted on a fine horse. He paused long enough to empty his revolver into the crowd of pursuers, sending one man down in the dust, then he galloped away, yelling his defiance like an Indian.

At that moment Daisy Dare heard Old Sunflower say at his side:

"Doc allows es how ther Spotter's got it fer keeps."

CHAPTER XI.

VIOLET VANE AND MADAM MIDNIGHT.

VIOLET VANE was alone in his room at the hotel when he heard a low, stealthy knock at the door. Instantly dropping his left hand into a side-pocket of his coat, where it grasped the butt of a convenient revolver, he called out:

"Come in."

After some hesitation, the door was pushed cautiously open and a rounded, repulsive figure squirmed through the aperture and stood bowing and blinking before the Velvet Sport.

It was Snaky Slink, the Bulldogs' Tool.

Vane vented an exclamation of surprise and disgust.

"Well, what do you want?" he demanded.

The repulsive creature glanced searchingly around the room before replying; then, with that peculiar and nerve-chilling snake-like movement, he advanced a few steps, pausing near the center of the apartment at a gesture from the sport.

"Are we all erlone, boss?" he questioned, in a hissing whisper.

"Quite," nodded Vane.

Slink craned his neck forward and fixed his black, shiny eyes on the Violet Sport, while he slowly passed his hands over each other as if washing them.

"I want ter speak with ye," he whispered.

"All right, go ahead."

"I come in byer ter tell ye you're in danger."

Vane smiled, scornfully.

"That is not news."

"Then ye know it?"

"Yes."

Slink looked disappointed.

"But ye don't know who yer enemies is?"

"Perhaps not."

Slink's red tongue played out and in between his parted lips as he stole forward a step.

"I know."

Again the sport smiled.

"Are you in the ring?" he asked.

The Snake shook his head in a puzzled manner.

"I don't understand."

"Bah!" exclaimed Vane, suddenly. "Do not attempt to work any game on me, for I warn you my hand rests on the butt of a revolver that is already cocked with the muzzle covering your heart. If you have been sent here to knife me, you had better get out now, for if you do not, the chance is you will be carried out. I can shoot without taking my hand from my pocket."

At this the creature cowered, protesting he was not there for anything but a friendly purpose.

"I know they call me Bulldogs' Tool," he said; "but I hate both of ther Bulldogs!"

Then he paused and gazed around once more in a startled manner as if fearing he had been overheard, while the singular spots on his face changed color in a remarkable manner. A

shudder of disgust ran over Violet Vane as he witnessed what appeared to be the terror of the deformed creature.

"Ef they sh'd hear me they'd kill me," whispered the Snake. "But it hain't thet I keer fer most. Somehow—I don't know jest how—they've got me so I'm their dog. I can't do ary thing w'n I'm with them but jest ez they want me ter. I've tried, but it hain't no use. Ef they tell me ter knife er man, I jest *hev* ter do it. Not thet I keer so much 'bout thet, but they are heapin' most of the dangerous work onter me, an' ther fu'st thing I know I'll be gettin' my neck stretched. An' it's fer thet reason I wish they wuz both dead an' burried. I'd do ther job myself, but w'en I tries ter, I jest fine I hain't got ther power."

"Well, did you come here to tell me this mess of stuff?"

"No, no! hole on! I hev suthin' else ter say. I know who yer enemies are, an' I'm going ter tell ye. Las' night I heerd the plot ter scoop ye in. It wuz laid in ther cabin of the Bulldogs, an' your ole foe as call hisself High Card Harry wuz thar."

At this Vane uttered an exclamation.

"He! he! he!" laughed Slink. "I thought thet'd fetch ye. Yes, High Card Harry wuz thar an' Captain Marvel wuz thar. They paid ther Bulldogs ter capter ye an' yer pards an' deliver both inter their han's. I heerd ther bargain."

"Is this true?"

The snake nodded and twisted his face into a horrible grin, while his round red tongue played between his lips.

For a few moments Violet Vane questioned Slink closely, trying to discover if the creature was lying, but the traitorous wretch told a straight story, and the sport finally became convinced it was the truth.

"Well, I am somewhat in your debt," he acknowledged; "although we should have been on the guard against Red Hot's twin ruffians anyway. As it is, this is your pay," tossing Slink a coin, which the fellow deftly caught, bowing and grimacing his thanks.

"But thet hain't all," assured the Snake, when he had pocketed the coin. "You hev other enemies right hyer in town—enemies you will not suspect. I don't know all of 'em, but I do know one."

"Who is that?"

"It is a woman."

"A woman?" in amazement.

"Yep."

"Well, this is becoming interesting. Who is she?"

"She calls herself Madam Midnight."

"More and more! What is she?"

"A fortoone-teller, boss."

"Ah-a!"

"She hain't bin long in town, but they do say she kin tell all erbout ther future or ther past."

"I must see her."

"She is in league with your enemies—is one of 'em."

"How do you know?"

Slink nodded and grinned in a horrible way.

"I hain't no fool," he declared, his hands again gliding smoothly over each other. "I have ways of discovering things. A snake kin crawl anywhere."

Vane could not repress a low exclamation of disgust, but he asked:

"Where can I find this Madam Midnight?"

"At her place of business nigh ther north eend of ther town."

"Has she a sign out?"

"Yep."

"Is she always in to callers?"

"Nop; sometimes she can't be foun' fer days. But she's in now, fer I saw her go inter her house not hafe a hour ago."

"Then this is my time to catch her. Here is a mate to the first coin I gave you, and you will please me by immediately making yourself scarce in this vicinity."

Bowing with the undulating motion of a serpent, Slink glided toward the door, and Vane drew a breath of relief when he saw it close behind the repulsive creature.

Ten minutes later the Violet Sport was on the street walking briskly toward the north end of the town, having decided to lose no time in calling on the fortune-teller.

He had little difficulty in finding Madam Midnight's place, and he boldly rapped on the door, having decided he would be on his guard and watch closely for traps.

In a moment the door swung open, apparently of its own accord, and somewhere within a pleasant musical voice invited him to enter.

Vane was not a man to hesitate once his mind was fixed, and he quietly accepted the invitation of the unseen person, the door closing softly behind him.

"This way, sir."

Heavy curtains parted before him and he passed through to find himself in the presence of the mysterious fortune-teller.

Madam Midnight had been fitly named.

She was dressed fully in black, her face being concealed by a mask of the same somber hue, with the exception of the full red lips and round, firm chin. Her dress had been cut low in the neck, fully revealing the perfect contour of her round white throat, and suggesting in a subtle manner the flawless molding of the woman's entire figure. Through the black lace sleeves of the dress could be detected the outlines of her cream-white arms.

Violet Vane caught his breath in surprise, for, despite the baffling mask, he felt he was in the presence of a woman of ravishing beauty. Could it be possible this splendid creature, whose midnight hair was created for the purpose of entangling the hearts of men in its meshes, was truly his enemy? or had the treacherous Snake lied to him for some evil purpose of his own?

Madam Midnight with one tastily jeweled hand made a motion toward a chair, into which he mechanically suuk. As she availed herself of another chair, he was dazzled by the fire of a mass of diamonds which blazed on her bosom, despite the subdued light of the apartment, at the point where the open neck of her dress reached its lowest extremity.

"You have called to consult me professionally?" inquired the mysterious woman, speaking in a full, musical voice which charmed the sport.

Vane bowed, but inwardly he was saying:

"Keep a check on yourself, old man. You are old enough to have a little sense, and this woman's appearance proclaims what she is."

"Then it is needless for me to ask you further questions," said Madam Midnight, quietly. "I am not of the class that ask their victims all manner of questions and then tell a crafty story from the information thus obtained. My fee is five dollars, which must be paid in advance. Then I will tell you all you wish to know, whether it be of the past or the future."

Without a word, Vane paid the fee.

"Now," said the fortune-teller, "I must hold your hands for a moment to put myself into communion with your soul. Please remain silent and think of any person concerning whom you desire information."

Their hands met and the sport felt a thrill run over him. Her soft, warm fingers clasped his and her eyes gazed straight into his own. With a start of amazement, he perceived her eyes were blue. For some reason, in that remarkably brief space of time, he had come to believe them black like her midnight hair, and the revelation that they were not gave him a singular shock.

The woman of mystery did not appear to notice his start but continued to gaze silently into his eyes. Slowly he felt a quiet, calming influence stealing over him, and, remembering her request to fix his mind on any person of whom he desired information, he thought of Ione, his lost love. Almost instantly the eyes of the dark-robed fortune-teller closed, she released his hands, and began speaking mechanically.

CHAPTER XII.

MYSTIC VISIONS OF THE BLACK ROOM.

"I SEE a maiden," began Madam Midnight, speaking slowly—"a maiden with blue eyes and sunny hair. Her lips are like the petals of a red rose, and when she smiles I can catch a glimpse of pearly teeth. There are touches of pink color in her cheeks, and she is very pretty. It is of her you are thinking."

Vane was surprised, but instantly came the thought: "Does she look sad?"

As if she had read his mind, the mysterious woman replied:

"No, no; there is not a trace of sorrow on her face. She seems as light-hearted and happy as a bird. She laughs and sings and spends the hours in happiness."

"Then it cannot be Ione," flashed through the sport's mind. "If it were she, she would be unhappy, for we are separated."

Again did it seem Madam Midnight understood his very thoughts, for she said:

"It is the one of whom you think, but she is happy because she has found another to fill your place—"

"It is a lie!" cried Vane, with sudden fury. "Do not try to deceive me with your crooked tales, woman!"

Madam Midnight sat quite still for some time, and when he had choked down his sudden rage, the sport fell to looking at her with a mixture of wonder and scorn. At length, she spoke:

"Your words banished the vision for a time. You must remember I am not responsible for what I see."

Vane felt chagrined and disgusted with himself, for, in allowing his sudden passion sway, he had quite forgotten he was speaking to a lady—a woman, at least, one who deserved a certain amount of respect because she was of the truer and tenderer sex. His cheeks crimsoned with shame, and he murmured:

"I beseech your pardon. I scarcely knew what I said. I deserve a whipping for speaking thus with a lady. If you will continue, I will promise to hold a good guard over my unruly tongue."

"I will try," she said, quietly, "although it is not always possible to recall the visions which have been banished by an interruption. I shall have to hold your hand again."

Once more their hands met, but he saw the woman had not opened her eyes. He gazed steadily into the twin holes of the sable mask, half-hoping she would do so, for there had been something wonderfully fascinating about those blue orbs. But he was disappointed, for the blue eyes remained closed.

Gradually he felt himself being overcome by a dreamy torpor—a strange, pleasant feeling of drowsiness. He struggled against it in a measure, determined not to fall fully into the power of the masked woman. He believed he was being mesmerized, and sought to draw his hands away. He was surprised when she offered no resistance, but the pleasant feeling of lassitude did not pass from him, and he sunk back in the chair, apparently half asleep, yet fully cognizant of everything around him.

Madam Midnight began speaking once more:

"I see a picture of the past. Two lovers stand before an aged man, whose hair is touched with the frost of age. The youth is dark, the maiden fair. They have come to entreat the maiden's father to consent to their marriage. The consent is given with a blessing, and the lovers depart happy."

"But an unseen cloud lies on the horizon. It rises with appalling swiftness, and bursts before either of the three is aware of its approach. A bank is robbed, and suspicion falls heavily on the maiden's father. The evidence seems overwhelming, and the old man's chance is small indeed."

"But at this point the young man resolves to make a sacrifice for his sweetheart's father—he will give up everything, liberty, honor, all. With this noble resolve, he publicly announces himself as the robber of the bank. He is arrested and thrown into prison, but he escapes before the case comes to trial, and succeeds in evading the officers of the law."

"The young man's sacrifice does not remove all suspicion from his sweetheart's father. There are many who still believe the aged gentleman guilty, and he is asked to resign his position in the bank. This he does, and, unable to remain in the place where he is a social outcast, he starts with his daughter for a new home in the West."

"Meantime, the young man has been on the trail of the real robber, and has pursued him to a Western town. To this town come the old man and his daughter. The young couple meet, and the maiden's lover is chilled to the heart by her cold manner. Unable to comprehend the nobility of his sacrifice, her heart has grown cold, and she has almost begun to believe he is truly guilty."

"But soon she falls into serious trouble, from which the noble lover rescues her. Then, when the real bank robber is arrested by a detective, she perceives her mistake and tries to make amends for her coldness. The young man is delighted, but he has not sounded the shallow depths of her heart."

"With the death and confession of the robber, the young man's name is cleared forever of the stain upon it. Then the lovers decide upon a time to be married and start on their journey to the East—a journey destined not to be completed."

"In the night a band of outlaws come down on the stage. A desperate battle ensues, during which the old man is wounded and the girl carried away. To-day the old man is slowly recovering from his wound in a certain Colorado camp, while the young man is on the trail of the outlaws, hoping to rescue his sweetheart. Have I not told you the truth concerning the past?"

Vane roused himself enough to reply:

"Thus far you have in many respects."

"I have in every respect."

"No, no! The girl never believed her lover guilty of the bank robbery."

"You think so. You have perfect faith in her, because you are the one who loves her; but you have not rightly sounded her shallow nature. I tell you she is happy while separated from you—happy in the outlaw camp—happy with a robber lover!"

At this the sport threw off his torpor somewhat, replying warmly:

"If you were not a woman, I should know how to answer such a falsehood; as it is, I do not wish to repeat my words of a few minutes ago."

"Why do you doubt me?"

"Because I have every reason to doubt. She has proved true in the past."

"You think so and thus deceive yourself. She is as false as another is true."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean there is another who loves you—loves you truly with heart, body and soul."

"Another—who?"

"You have never seen her, but she has seen you, and she fell in love with you at first sight. She is as beautiful—more beautiful than the one who has proven false."

"This is nonsense!"

"Think you so? Then you shall see the visions of the Black Room."

She pressed her hands over the eye-holes of the somber mask, and seemed to emerge from the trance-like state. At the same moment Vane felt the pleasant sensation of lassitude pass from him. He arose to his feet, saying:

"I have heard enough—quite enough for my money. I will now take my leave."

But Madam Midnight clung to his arm and her blue eyes entreated him to stay. Her lips were not idle.

"You are not convinced. Then I beg you to come to the Black Room. There I will not talk, but I will show you strange visions of the future. You have only heard of the past; consent to take a glimpse at the future."

He yielded and allowed her to conduct him into another apartment—a room as dark as midnight. He half-expected an attack, and his hands clutched his trusty revolvers, ready for the emergency. Madam Midnight would have pressed him into a chair, but he chose to remain standing, and thus she left him there in the darkness.

Suddenly a faint light of mingled tints, red and green, partly illuminated the room, and he saw it came from a large urn standing near the center of the apartment. The light revealed, instead of walls to the room, dark draperies on every side. It was a Black Room indeed!

From the urn rose a cloud of singular purple-colored smoke which filled the room with a delightful intoxicating perfume. Before his eyes the smoke spread till with untold wonder he saw what appeared to be a pleasant valley shut in on every hand by perpendicular bluffs and lofty mountain peaks. There were men and tents in the valley. Many of the men were busy erecting rude huts. Through the valley ran a stream of water which, at the upper end, came falling down over some rocks in a picturesque cascade. Through his mind flashed the thought that he was looking upon the mountain retreat of Captain Marvel.

Upon a high cliff near the waterfall he saw three persons—two females and a man. One of the three he instantly recognized. It was Ione. But not Ione as he had often thought of her since her capture by the bandits. There was not a cloud on her pretty face—not a trace of sorrow. She seemed to be talking and laughing merrily, and the man who lay on the moss close by was listening eagerly, a look of more than admiration on his face. When his eyes met those of the golden-haired maiden, something seemed to pass between them that established a perfect understanding. The sight filled Vane's heart with rage, but when he tried to cry out, his lips seemed sealed, and he sunk, faint with the sweet odor of the smoke, into the chair close at hand.

The scene changed. The figures faded from the cliff and a hazy darkness came over the valley. It was night. He was looking on the same waterfall, and near the foot of it he saw a man pacing nervously in the gloom. Another figure appeared, hurrying toward the waterfall. He recognized it, but still his lips were frozen together. The two—man and woman—met there alone in the darkness. His arm stole round her waist, he drew her to his heart, he covered her face—her lips—with kisses. Oh, the agony of that moment for the man who lay helpless and panting in the chair, witnessing a scene that appeared actually taking place before his tortured eyes!

Still another scene—a cavern chamber illuminated by flaring, smoking torches. Hand in hand stood a beautiful girl and a man whose face was concealed by a mask. He knew the girl—Ione! Before them stood a black-robed man who held a book in his hand. A marriage ceremony was taking place, and the witnesses were the entire outlaw band led by Captain Marvel. With the cold sweat starting from his pores, Vane tried to cry out once more, but he only uttered a low gurgling moan. Then the vision vanished, and somewhere, as if at a vast distance, he heard the voice of Madam Midnight saying:

"You have seen the false one, now look on the one who loves you truly with all her heart."

Again the purple smoke rose in a cloud from the urn, filling the room with its intoxicating perfume and once more he was looking into the outlaws' valley. He saw a yellow-haired and blue-eyed maiden whose contour was grace and beauty itself, whose face was one to fascinate most men and lead them to the very brink of madness. She appeared to be coming down the valley, and Vane watched her breathlessly. She looked toward him, turned her glorious blue eyes on him, and he felt his head swim with a singular intoxication. He tried to tear his eyes from hers, but he was like one fascinated by the orbs of a serpent—powerless to move or utter a sound.

Nearer and nearer came the beautiful woman, an alluring smile on her red lips, a sensuous, inviting air about her every movement. The figure grew larger before his eyes still—wonder of wonders!—it assumed the actual proportions of life and seemed to stand before him there in that very room. Still the sweet will-destroying smoke rolled up from the mystic urn, and Vane felt that consciousness was slipping from him despite his efforts to rouse himself.

Silently, slowly, the handsome, enticing woman of the outlaw valley drew nearer. He felt her presence in the room, he knew she was there. It was no vision now, still he was powerless. He heard the rustle of her dress! She was close before him! Smiling, a distracting love-light in her bewildering blue eyes, she knelt beside the chair. She touched him, and he felt a thrill run over every nerve. Her soft warm arms stole round his neck, her breath was on his face, her full red lips were close to his. Enchanted, enraptured, losing all control of his mind as well as his body, he clasped her to his heart, kissing her again, again. He felt her in his arms, he felt the contact of her soft, warm lips, a wild, delirious joy seized him—a mad feeling of happiness he had never before experienced in all his life.

Then the perfume of the purple smoke settled chokingly around them both, his eyes slowly closed, and consciousness slipped quite from his grasp.

CHAPTER XIII.

CAPTAIN MARVEL HOLDS HIGH CARDS.

A PERIOD of unconsciousness followed, after which Vane faintly remembered lying for a long time in a state of semi-sensibility, dimly aware he was in a darkened room, apparently alone, quite alone. He tried to bestir himself, but the demon of inability held him fast, while a hand of burning iron pressed upon his head and seared into his very brain. He tried to cry out with the agony, but his lips were locked. He felt he was doomed, doomed.

How long he remained in that state of half-conscious agony he had no means of telling, but it seemed an eternity. He thought days, weeks, months, years elapsed. The belief that he was dead finally settled upon him. He was suffering the penalty of the sins committed in life.

At length, he fancied there were moving figures in the room. He could not see them, but he seemed to feel them around him. They spoke in subdued tones, but he could not understand their words. Their language seemed strange and unfamiliar.

He felt himself lifted from the floor and carried along, although it seemed no hands were laid upon him. Of a sudden, a strong breath of cool air swept across his face, giving him new life and starting the stagnant blood in his veins. A new belief came to him: he was not dead, but was in the power of his deadly foes. With this thought he once more struggled to throw off the torpor, and succeeded enough to hear a low voice hiss close at hand:

"He's coming round! Give him another smell of the rag."

Something touched his face, something that gave out a sweet and sickening perfume. He tried to hold his breath that he might not take

the sense-destroying odor into his lungs, but he was forced to breathe after a time. His head swam, a roaring sounded in his ears, the darkness of eternal night came over him.

He knew no more till he found himself lying on the cold, damp stones of a cavern floor. A light glimmered close at hand, throwing mysterious fantastic shadows on the black walls of the cavern chamber—shadows which danced around him like a legion of evil spirits rejoicing at the ill-fortune which had fallen upon him. He watched them nodding at him in a triumphant manner, peering and pointing at him from the corners of the small square chamber, hanging behind projecting points of rock where they could look down on him with what his disordered mind fancied were smiles of delight.

For some time he lay quite still, watching the shadows and thinking of nothing else, but at length he forced his mind to turn back and revive the singular events which had drawn him into his present position. Almost his first thought was that Snaky Slink had been an emissary of his foes. The scheme to lead him into a trap had succeeded; he had walked into it like an innocent child quite unaware of the tricks and deceptions of the world. He despised himself for being so easily entrapped. But his capture had been accomplished in a quite unexpected way. If they had attempted to overpower him in an ordinary manner, he would have been quite ready for them. But he had been tricked, tricked.

Slowly, with mingled wonder and disgust, he recalled the strange visions of the Black Room. With a knowledge of his past, his enemies had worked the scenes to suit themselves. He could not deny that it had been skillfully done, but he felt it was all the work of crafty jugglery. About one thing he was not satisfied. The strange girl of the outlaws' valley had seemed to approach him and enter the very room where he was. He had fancied she was close beside him—had fancied he kissed her warm lips; but had it not been entirely fancy, after all? He could not tell. The last moments before losing consciousness seemed strangely blended with the agonized hours during which he had lain powerless and half-aware of his situation, and his muddled brain refused to disentangle the confused threads. Possibly the whole thing had been the hallucinations of a brain deranged by the sweet odor of the purple smoke that rose from the mystic urn.

Having arrived at this conclusion, he discovered he was lying in a somewhat painful position with his hands beneath his back. He made an effort to move and found he could do so, to his great relief. But he could not withdraw his hands from beneath his back, and although they were numb and devoid of feeling, he realized they were tied behind him. With some difficulty, he arose to a sitting posture.

A candle was burning on top of a boulder near the center of the small chamber. The dim, flickering light showed him his surroundings. He was a prisoner, for a heavy door blocked the only entrance to the chamber. In the door was set some iron bars across a square aperture through which a current of cold, damp air came from the cavern corridor beyond.

"Well, this is a fine scrape!"

Vane uttered the words, and was pleased to find he had recovered the use of his tongue, although his voice sounded harsh and unnatural.

Making another effort, he succeeded in getting on his feet, and, with a sigh of relief, he stretched his cramped limbs as well as he could. His head was somewhat dizzy and there was a feeling of sickness at the pit of his stomach, but he resolutely remained standing and both sensations relaxed in a measure.

As he stood there he heard a step outside the door, followed by the sliding of some heavy bolts, then a masked man stepped into the prison chamber as the heavy door swung open. The man carried his name lettered on his breast:

"Captain Marvel."

The heavy door closed behind the outlaw chief, who bowed mockingly to the prisoner.

"And how do I find my guest?" tauntingly inquired the bandit leader.

The sport did not reply. He was scanning the man's figure closely. More than once he had fancied Captain Marvel was his old foe High Card Harry, but now he realized his error. The gambler was a tall and finely formed fellow, while the outlaw chief was below the average height of men. If this was in truth Captain Marvel, High Card Harry could not be the leader of the robbers.

Folding his arms over his lettered name, the mask broke into a loud, derisive laugh.

"Have you lost your tongue, little Johnny?"

jump-up?" he asked. "Has your power of speech departed with your tall hat and your posies?"

"What do you want?"

"Ahl so you can talk! Really I am surprised. What do I want? Well, I want to see how my guest is looking."

"Thanks for your interest," bowed Vane, a smile curling his lips, and a defiant light in his eyes. "It is so kind of you!"

Captain Marvel laughed.

"So your spirit is not broken? That is good, for you will see enough to crush it quite before I have done with you."

"So you are in the spirit-crushing business? How long since you gave up robbing and kidnapping?"

"Better guard that tongue," said the outlaw, with an angry gesture. "Remember you are quite in my power. I assure you I am no man to trifle with."

"It is singular how the most insignificant snapping curs always think themselves terribly dangerous."

Captain Marvel's hands fell and became clinched, while he took a threatening step forward. Vane remained quite unmoved, the taunting smile on his lips, not the least sign of fear coming to his handsome face.

"I am tempted to strike you!" cried the mask.

"The desire of a cowardly heart, as I am helpless and unarmed. Is that the kind of a man Captain Marvel is?"

The outlaw seemed a bit confused and ashamed. After a moment of hesitation, he said:

"I ask your pardon. It was an unmanly temptation, but I cannot always govern my temper. You should not lead me to the verge of such an act by acerbity of your tongue."

Vane laughed bitterly, scornfully.

"It amuses me to hear you—you make that kind of talk. Have I spoken anything but the truth? Why was I captured in this cowardly manner and brought to this place?"

"Because I commanded it."

"And you are the hired tool of another."

The outlaw tossed his head with a haughty gesture.

"You are mistaken: I am working on my own accord. That you have another enemy I am well aware, but not a dollar of his money brought you here, though he will be pleased to know of your capture."

"But what have you against me?"

"You are the only being who stands between me and perfect happiness."

Vane was staggered by the reply.

"I—I stand between you and happiness? What can you mean?"

"Just what I said. You and I both love the same girl."

"Oo-oh! The wind blows that way?"

"Exactly. This girl once fancied she loved you, but she has since learned her mistake. She cares for you no longer."

"Bahl!" cried the sport. "Do you think you can make me believe that?"

"It is the truth, and she has bound herself to me by a solemn promise."

"Liar!"

"It is true. She says she is afraid of you and would never dare marry another while you are able to harm her, but when you are safely out of the way she will become my wife."

Violet Vane's face turned livid and his eyes seemed to fairly burn. He sprung forward a step, and Captain Marvel involuntarily fell back.

"If my hands were free," hissed the sport, "I would choke back the lie in your vile throat! Dastard! kidnapper! liar! it is well for you I am not free!"

The robber laughed tauntingly.

"So that touched you where it is tender? Well, you shall learn I spoke nothing but the truth. In this game for a woman's heart I hold all the high cards. She shall be mine, mine, and you shall see us be made man and wife. This I promise you. Then you shall die and be out of our way forever. I will now leave you to your own thoughts. Pleasant thoughts they must be, ha! ha! ha!"

The heavy door swung open at his touch and closed behind his retreating form. Not a moment too soon, for, bound though he was, the Violet Sport hurled himself against the portal. But it remained unmoved, and without the chamber Captain Marvel's taunting laugh receded and died out in the distance of the echoing cavern.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SPOTTER STEPS OUT.

DAISY DARE was not alarmed when he failed

to find Violet Vane at the hotel, he was not alarmed at Vane's absence during the entire day, and when the wearer of the violets failed to appear with the approach of darkness, Dare was not alarmed, but was puzzled and surprised.

He felt as if his pard was fully able to take care of himself unless overcome in a most unexpected manner; and even when night was at hand, he believed Vane would soon turn up and explain his absence.

Dare thought it possible Vane had struck a clew, and was working up some kind of a trail. Perhaps when he returned he would be able to lead the way to the lost ones.

The Daisy Sport spent the greater part of the day after the struggle with the Bulldogs in wandering around, keeping his eyes and ears wide open while he smoked the best cigars obtainable in Red Hot.

Red Hutch had escaped the party which pursued him, but it was said he would be promptly lynched if he ever appeared in camp again. Dare understood that this was "talk" that would soon be forgotten, and in a few days—weeks, at most—the red-headed rustian would be able to strut the streets of the camp unmolested, even gazed at with awe and admiration by many of the inhabitants. Men had often been made marshal or mayor for a greater crime!

With the approach of night and the non-appearance of Vane, Dare became still more uneasy. He knew it was possible the wearer of the violets had fallen into trouble of a serious nature, for the advent of the Posy Pards in Red Hot was known to their foes. Saul Spot's action had proclaimed this, and Dare thought it evident the brutal Bulldogs had been hired to put the sports out of the way.

"If so, they made a grand slip-up," laughed the blue-eyed dandy. "Both High Card Harry and Saul Spot should know Vane well enough to have their tools better posted. But it is possible they thought me made of tender material. If that is true, they will now have ample opportunity to regret their poor judgment. The card sharp at last will have sufficient time, but I fancy the Spotter's hours are numbered."

Night came, and still Violet Vane did not appear. Dare watched and waited with growing anxiety.

"If he had thought of remaining absent so long, he would have let me know," muttered the perplexed sport. "It was something unexpected, that is certain. Somehow a feeling that he is in trouble is settling over me. I believe I will hunt up Old Sunflower and see if he can help me out."

He had little difficulty in finding the strange tramp, and the old fellow seemed quite troubled when he learned of Vane's singular disappearance and continued absence.

"Suthin' wrong, Daisy," he declared, with a sober shake of his woolly head. "Sweet Violets hain't ther lad ter play sich er racket without that's ther Ole Boy ter pay."

"But he may have struck a clew to the whereabouts of the lost ones and be following it up."

"He may, an' thent clew may hev led him right inter er trap. I tell you thar's suthin' wrong."

"Well, I begin to fear so myself."

"Hev ye made ary inquirings?"

"A few, but could learn nothing. However, I am going the push the matter now."

"Thet's right."

"I shall begin at the hotel and see if I can trace him."

"I'm with ye."

"And in the past you have proved your value."

"Thankee, leetle pard, thankee. I feel like I wuz one o' this yere posy combine now, an' it won't do fer ther triangle ter be bruck up."

Together they went back to the hotel and Dare began to make such inquiries as he thought proper and best. At first he seemed to make no headway, but after a time he learned of Snaky Slink's visit to Vane's room.

"Now we're gittin' at it!" exclaimed Old Sunflower, with a touch of excitement. "I've seen ther darned onery critter they call Snake Slink, an'—ugh!—he guv me ther creeps. Reckon he'd jes' ez lief knife er man as kill er drink o' whisky. He's er bad egg, you hear me!"

Further inquiry revealed the fact that the man with the violets had left the hotel after the Snake's departure, but no one seemed able to tell which way he had gone. It almost appeared as if the trail stopped at the door.

"Our next move is to find this Snaky Slink," said Dare.

"An' ef he refused ter guv us ther p'ints—"

"We will force the truth from him."

"Yep, I'd choke it out o' th'r critter, though I'd hate mortally ter putt my han's on him. It'd seem like I wuz grippin' er serpent."

Together they set out to search for the Snake, but they were destined to be disappointed, for Slink was not to be found in the town and no one seemed able to tell whether he had vanished.

"Crawled inter his hoel an' pulled ther hoel in arter him!" exploded the ragged tramp, in disgust.

"Now I am fully convinced there has been foul play," said Dare, his eyes flashing dangerously.

"W'at's ter be did next, Daisy?"

"I scarcely know. It seems as if we must find this Slink. Without him, we appear all at sea."

"Right ye are, leetle pard."

"Can you suggest something?"

"P'raps we'd best find out w'at Major Mars thinks. He's ther high cock o' this camp in many ways."

"A g'ldilocks, 'Ress—"

"Be your pardon. Old Sunflower."

"Oy, yes. I am apt to br'et your now handle."

They had little difficulty in finding the Confederate officer, and when they met, the major declared he was looking for Dare.

"A coincidence," smiled the sport, "as I was looking for you."

"At?" interrogatively.

"Yes; I thought perhaps you might be able to aid us in some way."

"If it is possible, command me," bowed the old soldier.

"Thank you," said Dare. "Your readiness to aid us is appreciated, I assure you."

He then gave the major full particulars of his pard's disappearance, as far as he was acquainted with them. The veteran listened with increasing interest, his face becoming quite grave. When the sport had finished, he said:

"That Slink is the most treacherous and dangerous creature in Red Hot. The citizens should have run him out of camp long ago."

"Then you think—?"

"That there has been foul play—yes. Slink is not at the bottom of it; he has not enough brains for that. There is some one behind him."

At this, Old Sunflower nodded vigorously, and Dare said:

"Your inference is correct, without a doubt. We have enemies who may well wish us out of the way, and of course they have worked this little game. But we are two very hard men to down, and they will find it out. If Vane has been murdered, I will wreak a fearful vengeance upon his assassins!"

"I believe you," nodded the major. "You are a man who keeps his word always; I see that in your eyes. And let me tell you now I like you and will be ready to fight for you through thick and thin."

"Thank you."

Their hands met in a firm grasp.

"I am sorry," continued the old soldier, "that I can throw no light on the present whereabouts of the Snake. I have never had enough interest in the creature to inquire where he stopped in camp when not hanging about the saloons. It is plain he should be found first of all and forced to tell the truth. If he tries to lie, swing him for a few seconds to the nearest limb. One or two doses of that will be pretty sure to bring him to his senses."

"But if we cannot find him—?"

"We shall have to strike the trail of your missing friend some other way. But I am forgetting my errand. Saul Spot is dying."

"Ah?"

"Yes; he has but a short time longer to live. They say he has been asking for you for more than an hour. I dropped in to see him a few minutes ago, and he made me promise to hunt you up and send you to him. You will have to go at once if you see him alive."

"Where is he?"

"In a back room of the Happy-Go-Lucky."

Five minutes later Daisy Dare was standing beside the rude couch on which lay the dying desperado. At first he thought the Spotter dead, for he lay with closed eyes, appearing quite lifeless; but slowly the doomed wretch's eyes unclosed, and when they fell on Dare an eager light gleamed in their depths, his lips moving, but no sound issuing from them.

"You sent for me," said the sport, softly, bending over the bed.

The Spotter made another effort to speak and succeeded in whispering faintly:

"Yes—I felt like I—must speak. Dying—dying! I must go before the Judgment—Bar with

—all these sins on my—soul. My God! it is—terrible!"

Dare shuddered as he witnessed the agony of the man's last moments—the bitter anguish and remorse for a life misspent. He felt the man suffering the punishment for his sins, and a great feeling of pity and forgiveness swept over him.

"Lift my head!" panted Saul. "There—I breathe—more freely. Are we quite alone?" his eyes roving round the bare room.

"Yes, quite alone."

"Good! I feared—they would not leave us—alone. I had to—lie. I told them—I wanted to taunt you before I—died. If I had not—told them that—they would not—have allowed you to—to come. It was my last sinful—act, but perhaps—God"—hesitating at the name of the Almighty, which in life he had taken in vain thousands of times—"perhaps God will forgive—that—as it was done for a good—purpose. But he cannot—forgive all my—black sins—no, no, no! They will drag me down, down, down!"

Daisy Dare's heart was touched and tears dimmed his eyes. He reached out and took the man's limp hands between his own, feeling his utter inability to comfort the dying wretch in that last hour as he stood at the threshold of the Great Unknown. Saul smiled faintly at the act.

"You have a generous heart," he said, seeming strengthened by the sport's expressive action, and speaking with new life and steadiness. "You are a man—a noble man! But what am I? A blood-stained wretch! Never a drop of liquor has passed my lips, because I did not dare use it. I knew it would make a demon of me, and there was fiend enough in my nature. But I must stop talking of myself, for I know my minutes are numbered. I called you here to tell you about your pard—Violet Vane."

Dare started, exclaiming:

"Can you tell me what has become of him?"

"Yes, he has fallen into the hands of his and your enemies—and has been carried to the outlaws' stronghold up in the mountains twelve miles—to the south of this town. They told me that—thinking it would please me in my dying—moments. I—I—"

He gasped for breath and Dare fanned him with a wide-brimmed hat which he picked up from the floor. The dying man's eyes closed, and for a few moments the sport thought he had crossed the Dark Divide. But slowly the lids opened again and the poor fellow made one more desperate effort.

"You have—enemies—all around—you. Look out—for—"

A gurgling sigh—a dropping of the jaw—the sinful man's life was ended.

CHAPTER XV.

A BLIND HUNT.

THE dying man's statement that Violet Vane had fallen into the hands of his enemies and been taken to the outlaws' stronghold up in the mountains twelve miles to the south of the town impressed itself on the sport as the truth. The man had seemed honest and sincere and had known he was dying. Plainly the old feeling of hatred had quite left him and his only desire had been to do one commendable act before he died. He had not lived three minutes after telling what had become of the man with the violets.

"It is a clew," muttered Dare, as he sat looking at the silent figure before him. "I wish he had lived long enough to give me directions how to reach this outlaw retreat. As it is, it will have to be a blind hunt. I must tell Old Sunflower what I have heard."

He left the room of death and found Major Mars in the bar-room. Telling the old soldier the Spotter was dead, he hurried out. The tramp was at the door.

"Behold I see a new light in your eye!" exclaimed the wearer of the sunflower. "Methinks new developments have occurred. Am I right, Daisy?"

Dare nodded and motioned for the old fellow to follow him. When they were where they would not be liable to be overheard, the sport said:

"I have struck a clew."

"Whoop-ee! I knew it!"

"Vane has been trapped and carried to Captain Marvel's retreat."

"Jee-hocus!"

"The Spotter confessed in his last moments."

"Has he croaked?"

"Yes."

"An' be said Cap Marvel hed got his claws on Sweet Violets?"

"He said Vane had been carried to the out-

laws' stronghold amid the mountains twelve miles to the south of Red Hot."

"Did he tell ye how ter get thar?"

"He died before he could tell any more."

"Too bad, by Moses!"

"Yes, for we shall have to make a blind hunt of it."

"But we'll fine ther critters, leetle pard—we'll fine 'em."

"We must. But now for our plans. With his dying gasp the Spotter warned me to look out for enemies who are all around me. I am convinced we know not whom to trust."

Old Sunflower nodded.

"Now I propose to pick my men for a secret expedition and not let a man know anything further than that there is going to be a good show for hot work. Money will hire all the lads we want."

"An' ef a good part o' them prove ter be outlaws?"

"We shall have to take our chances on that. It is not at all liable there will be one outlaw to two honest men."

"No ner one ter five."

"It is the only thing I can see to be done. We must have the party armed and mounted ready to start at sunrise to-morrow."

"D'yer want me ter holp ye pick 'em out?"

"Yes, I am going to trust you. I know your judgment is good when you are not chuck with bad liquor—"

"Which is mighty seldom, pard."

"True. Here is money, use it to the best advantage hiring armed and mounted men. Do not pay a dollar for a man who has no horse and weapons, but if a man has guns and pledges himself to get there on foot, hire him. We may have to abandon the horses—before we get anywhere near the retreat of the mountain robbers."

With a few more words, they separated, each going about the work at hand. Although they did their best to keep the thing as quiet as possible, a whisper of the secret expedition ran over Red Hot like an electric thrill. It was not long before the entire town knew there was something of importance on hand.

Dare engaged Major Mars to look after Snaky Slink, but the old soldier found not a trace of the treacherous creature.

The following morning at sunrise nearly forty men assembled at the appointed place, every man armed to the teeth and nearly every man mounted. The entire town turned out to see them off.

Like a veteran general Old Sunflower rode up and down the street, mounted on a scrawny white horse of ancient appearance.

"Whoopee!" he squealed, waving his battered high silk hat above his woolly head. "This is ther grea-a-a-ter day o' jubilee! Ther fur will fly afore night ur my name hain't Ole Sunflower, ther Sport o' ther Shaggy Caput. Fun—Fun—ginoowine ole-fashioned Fun! w'y, we're goin' ter hev haydoogins o' it!"

With Dare and Old Sunflower at the head, the party rode out of the town, cheered by those left behind and cheering back themselves. Straight to the south they rode.

At an early opportunity Major Mars rode up beside Dare. He was mounted on a spirited horse, and looked the veteran soldier, indeed.

"Of course I understand this move," smiled the major. "And I fancy there are but few who do not. You have learned what has become of your pard and we are going to his rescue or to avenge him."

"You are correct," admitted the sport. Then he wheeled his horse and drew rein, flinging up one hand.

"Hold on a moment, pard!" he cried.

There was a general halt, and Dare continued:

"It is time you all understood what this expedition means. It has been kept a secret for a purpose, but I will tell you now, and give those who wish to back out, if there are any, a chance to do so. We are going to make an attempt to find the retreat of the outlaw, Captain Marvel."

A murmur ran over the party, and one old fellow cried:

"I reckoned ez much fu'st off. Can't play me blind fer shucks, an' don't ye fergit it!"

"Those who want to turn back can do so now," said Dare.

Not a man stirred.

"Thet's ther stuff!" yelled the sunflower tramp. "They're all in, pard."

"There may be hot work before us," warned Dare. "And it is quite likely blood will run."

"Lead on!" cried a voice, then with one grand roar the entire party echoed the words.

At that instant they heard a shout above their heads and every man turned his eyes upward. On a projecting spur of rocks a hundred feet

above stood two men gazing down at the outlaw hunters."

"The Bulldogs!" was the general cry.

Red Hutch lifted one arm and shouted:

"You are a fool, Daisy Dare! Your bitterest foes are with that party! Look out ur you'll git a knife in ther back!"

Then the Bulldogs leaped back and disappeared just as several of the party lifted their weapons and fired.

"Just in time to save their skins," observed Major Mars, grimly.

Once more the party moved forward.

Dare had little doubt but that Red Hutch had spoken the truth, but he could not think the ruffian had warned him from any feeling of friendliness. He resolved to keep constantly on the alert.

The outlaws' retreat had been well chosen, and it proved no easy thing to find it. Midday came and passed, and the men seemed utterly adrift amid the mountains.

Old Sunflower's horse gradually developed a desire to lag behind, and the tramp's coaxing and raving were ineffectual to urge it faster. Finally, he seemed to give up in despair and allow the animal to travel as slow as it pleased. In this way he fell far behind.

Suddenly he was startled by a low whistle and wheeled to one side to see Red Hutch standing a few rods away with his hands elevated above his head.

"Hole on, ole man!" softly cried the Bulldog. "I want ter speak with ye."

CHAPTER XVI.

CAPTAIN MARVEL CAPTURES THE PRIZE.

WITH a bitter curse, Violet Vane reeled back from the heavy door, the mocking laugh of the retreating outlaw captain sounding balefully in his ears. Fiercely he strained to break the cords which held his hands, but they held fast. Uttering a groan, he leaned against the boulder on which stood the dimly flickering candle. As he did so, his wrists struck against a sharp point of the rock and a new thought flashed through his mind.

Perhaps he could cut the cords against the rock.

This he at once attempted to do, and after five minutes of steady work, during which he scratched and lacerated his wrists, he felt the ropes give a little. In a few moments more he was free from bonds.

"If I only had Captain Marvel here now!" he gritted, savagely.

He snuffed the candle so it gave a better light, and then whirled swiftly with a low exclamation, for he had heard a soft step outside the door of the prison chamber.

He saw a face at the grated opening—the face of a beautiful girl!

A low cry of amazement came from his throat, for he recognized the face as that of the beautiful siren who had come to him in his final vision in Madam Midnight's mysterious Black Room!

With a quick motion, the girl lifted her hand and pressed one finger warningly to her red lips. He understood the gesture and remained silent. His eyes eagerly devouring the face behind the iron bars.

There was no mistake; it was the face of the vision. There were the same curving lips, the same heavenly blue eyes, the same bewildering flow of golden hair, the same alluring smile. His heart throbbed strangely in his bosom.

"Be silent," whispered the strange girl. "I am your friend. Speak softly."

"My friend?" he repeated. "Is that possible?"

She gave him a look of resentment that cut him like a knife.

"As if I could be anything else!" she softly exclaimed.

"But who are you?"

A cloud swept across her fair face—a cloud, or was it a shadow caused by the unsteady flare of the candle?

"Do not ask too much now," she cautioned.

"Pardon me. You must understand my amazement at seeing one so fair in such a place."

"Yes, yes. Come nearer so we may not have to speak so loudly. We must not be overheard."

He came close to the door.

"If I am detected here it will ruin everything," declared the girl, casting an anxious look into the darkness of the passage.

"Have you come to set me free?"

"Not now."

"Not now? By that I am led to believe you contemplate doing such a thing some time."

"Yes, yes; as soon as possible!"

"But why not now!"

"It would be madness!" she gasped. "You could not escape from the valley now if you tried and would soon be missed from this chamber. Then the valley would be searched and you would be recaptured. I would not obtain another chance to aid you. No, you must be patient."

In the liquid-blue of her bewitching eyes he saw the same look that had enchanted him in the vision—a look which caused his hot blood to leap more swiftly in his veins. He caught his breath and gazed at her face with growing admiration and with a singular emotion which he could not define. There was something mysterious, fascinating, bewildering about this sunny-haired maid of the outlaws' retreat—something that attracted and yet repelled him.

"I wish I might know the name of my new friend," he said, entreatingly.

She hesitated a moment, then said:

"You may call me Ada."

In a moment the truth flashed through his mind, and he was amazed that he had not thought of it before. This girl was Queen Ada who had so bitterly wronged his pard Daisy Dare. Involuntarily, he recoiled a step. She saw the move and a sudden pallor spread over her face.

"Do not look at me in that way!" she begged, nearly forgetting her caution with the emotion of the moment. "Your eyes look as if you saw a serpent!"

"I fear I do!"

The words came unbidden from his lips and he regretted them as soon as they were uttered. She looked crushed and agonized as if a dagger had been driven straight to her heart.

"What do you mean?" she gasped. "I knew not I had fallen as low as that."

"You are the outlaw queen."

She lifted her head a trifle proudly.

"I am. It is useless to deny the truth now. Perhaps it would have been better had I told you at first. Is that why you look at me with such aversion?"

"There is blood on your hands!"

"Blood?"

"Yes, the blood of a pure and innocent woman."

"Are you going mad? Explain your words!"

"Where is the wife of my friend, Dan Dare? Dead! She perished in the burning cabin which by your orders had been her prison! Her blood is on your hands!"

The girl smiled—actually smiled! He could have struck that beautiful face then. But her next words filled him with untold amazement.

"You were never more in error in all your life. Mrs. Dare is alive and well to-day."

For a moment he could not speak; but he finally succeeded in gasping hoarsely:

"Alive! It cannot be!"

"So help me heaven it is true! Did Dare think she perished in one of the cabins at Panther Pocket? He was wrong. She is a considerably treated captive at the present time."

He believed her and a great feeling of relief came over him.

"Thank God!" he exclaimed. "I am glad such a crime is not recorded against you!"

Her eyes melted once more with the soft light that affected him so strangely. He felt himself drawn to her in spite of the effort to resist her influence.

"I know I am called Queen of the Outlaws," she said, sadly; "but fate placed me where I am. I wish I might blot out the past forever—might flee far, far from it! I hate to think of it! Really I am nothing in the band now, Captain Marvel is the leader."

"And who is Captain Marvel? What are you to him?"

"Who is Captain Marvel? He is Captain Marvel. I can tell you no more. I am nothing to him. We united our forces that we might be the stronger to resist our common foe—the law. Since then I have lost my power, and I care not to ever regain it again. I hope to leave them and go away where nothing of my old life is known. But I need a friend—a friend!"

He was touched by the appeal, even though he fancied her acting. She did everything perfectly. He felt she was a woman who, when once she had captured a man's affection, could wring his heart as she pleased and still keep him at her feet. But suddenly he thought of Ione; he would ask of her.

"I have a very dear friend whom I believe in the hands of this Captain Marvel. Do you—"

"I know whom you mean," she said, a cloud once more sweeping over her face.

"What can you tell me of her?" eagerly.

She shook her head.

"I had rather tell you nothing."

He was puzzled by the reply, and he saw she had averted her eyes. A sudden fear fell on his heart and lay there like a mountain.

"What do you mean?" he hoarsely demanded.

"Is she ill?"

"No."

"What then?"

"You had better forget her."

He staggered as if struck in the face.

"Forgive me!" she whispered, a look of pain coming over her face as she witnessed his emotion. "I am sorry I spoke. I would not had I a second thought. It was cruel of me."

"Explain your words!" he commanded. "I must know the truth!"

"I cannot! I cannot! Do not—Hark! Some one is approaching! I must flee! Watch for me; I will come and set you free. For the present, good-by."

She was gone and once again he was alone in the prison chamber—alone with his torturing thoughts. Like a madman he paced the confines of the rocky walls, like a madman he raved out the bitterness of his heart. How much time passed he could not tell.

Finally he became calmer and even laughed at what he considered his childish emotion. Then he noticed a rude wooden waiter, bearing dishes of food and water, on the ground just within the chamber by the door. How it came he could not tell, but when his first feeling of amazement had subsided somewhat, he realized he was burning with thirst.

"I must drink and stand my chances of being poisoned," he thought, and seizing the dish of water, he took a long draught.

In a few moments he was seized by a feeling of drowsiness. He realized he had been drugged and cursed his folly in drinking at all. Within fifteen minutes he was sound asleep.

When he awoke he found himself lying on a couch spread on the ground. His hands and feet were bound and there was something in his mouth which held his jaws widely distended. He was gagged! He was lying in a dark nook but in such a position that he could look into a lighted cavern chamber where a large number of men, all masked, were collected. The prisoner understood that something of great importance was about to take place.

"He is awake."

The words were uttered by a man who was crouching over him. In less than a minute another person approached. It was Captain Marvel.

"Ha! ha!" laughed the chief of the outlaws, peering down at the helpless man through the eye-holes of his sable mask. "So you have come round. I am glad, for I had grown impatient of waiting. You are helpless in my power. From your position you can look out into that chamber, but any one out there cannot see you here. I have had you brought here to witness my triumph. You shall see me married by a regular justice to the beautiful girl you would make your wife. Ah-ah! that makes you squirm! I have told her you are dead and she believes it. Therefore she must not see you. You shall witness how willingly she becomes my bride."

Then he wheeled and walked away.

Vane dimly saw what followed till his eyes rested on two figures standing before a man who held an open book in his hand. With a thrill of horrible anguish he recognized them both. One was the outlaw captain, and the other—merciful Heaven!—the other was Ione, his Ione!

The masked outlaws gathered around and the ceremony began. Vane could see it all—could hear every word. He held his breath, his blood froze in his veins, a great horror and despair crushed his heart.

With mock solemnity the officiating justice repeated the words which were binding a beautiful girl to the triumphant outlaw, and every word fell on the prisoner's heart like a clod on a coffin. He longed to shriek, but the cruel gag strangled his cries to a gurgling groan. He tore furiously at his bonds; they held fast. Then he fell back with a feeling of despair and silently watched and listened.

Perhaps Ione was drugged! The thought came over him like a wave. But no! When it was her turn to speak, she responded plainly, distinctly, without a falter in her voice. How well he knew that voice! With a smile on her face, she consented to become the wife of the man who stood at her side and held her hand.

The ceremony was ended, they were pronounced man and wife, and the triumphant outlaw led her away. Lying helpless in the darkness, the betrayed one saw her glance up into the eyes of the masked bandit, and to some

low observation of his reply with a light laugh—the same old merry laugh of days forever dead. And in his heart Vane was crying:

"False, false, false!"

CHAPTER XVII.

MAJOR MARS MAKES HIS MARK.

OLD SUNFLOWER drew rein in amazement, jerking out a huge rusty looking revolver and covering the red-headed bully.

"Great gallopin' highpantodds!" grunted the tramp. "W'at do you want, you sweet-smellin' specimen o' degenerated humanity? Ef you've got enny business with me, work yer jaw lively. fer I'm in a howlin' ole hurry, an' this yere boss hates ter stan' still mighty. Whoa, thar, ye pesky fiery critter!" and he gave a jerk on the reins that nearly threw the drowsing animal off its feet.

Red Hutch came forward, still keeping his hands elevated.

"I'm hyer ter warn ye of danger," declared the ruffian, whose battered face made him anything but a pleasant object to look upon.

The sunflower tramp gave a snort of incredulity.

"Get out! thet's too thin!"

"It's ther truth," persisted the Bulldog.

"Turned missionary? Wal, then I reckon it's my solum duty ter shoot ye on ther spot afore ye backslide. Ef I don't, ye'll return ter ther flesh-pots o' Egypt, an' ther devil'll git ye in ther eend."

"Thar hain't no time fer foolin'," scowled the desperado. "I am givin' ye straight goods, all wool an' er yard wide. I've bin watchin' fer er chance ter speak ter Daisy Dare, but I've gi'n that up, an' now you must tell him w'at I say."

"How long since you an' him's bin on frien'y footin'?" inquired the doubter on the white horse.

"I know w'at you think. You reckon I'm still holdin' a grudge ag'in' him. Wal, I hain't. I've let that drap. He's jest ther best little man I ever set my two eyes on, an' I'm ready ter sw'ar ter thet. Cap'n Marvel an' a feller as calls hisself High Card Harry, hired I an' Black ter rope in ther Posy Pards. We got left, an' I knifed High Card's pard in ther skirmish. That puts me in jest this posish: I've got ter look out or High Card Harry will wipe me out ter even ther score. That's why I'm ready ter work ag'in' my ole bosses. See?"

Sunflower nodded, but the doubtful look still remained on his homely, beardless face.

"Now," continued Red Hutch. "w'at I want ter tell ye is this: Thar's several of Cap'n Marvel's band with your crowd, an' I think High Card Harry hisself is ther. You'll never fine ther outlaws' camp while they are with ye ef they kin lead ye off ther track."

Old Sunflower grunted.

"I know jest whar Cap'n Marvel's hang-out is," declared the bully.

"Ye do?"

"Yep. I c'u'd lead a party straight to it."

"Then come lead us, an' ef ye play us foul I'll guarantee that you'll git a through ticket fer Kingdom Come. I shell be on ther watch fer snags an' shell perforate ye fu'st sign."

Hutch shook his head.

"I don't durst do it. W'y, High Card'd be sart'in ter plug me. No, ye don't git me inter that. But I'll tell ye this: Ye hain't anywhar on ther right track. Ther outlaws are camped in er leetle valley away yan ter ther east over ther ridge. I don't know of ary way ter git inter ther valley from this yere side. Ef ye git that, ye'll bev ter go back roun'."

"This looks ter me like er mighty big 'bluff,'" grinned the tramp. "P'raps we're gittin' too mighty snug ter Cap Marvel's hoel fer comfort an' he's sent you ter putt us off ther scent."

"You kin think so ef ye want ter. All I ask is that ye'll tell Daisy Dare w'at I've said."

"I reckon I'll let you tell it ter him yerself, Reddy."

"W'at d'yer mean?"

"That I hole ther drop an' you'd best march along ahead o' me tell we ketch up with ther procession. Savvy?"

Red Hutch laughed.

"Not ter enny great extent. Ef you'll jest take er look up ther a bit, you'll change yer mind, I reckon."

Old Sunflower's eye followed the Bulldog's pointing finger and some distance above on the brink of the ravine he saw Black Hutch standing with a cocked rifle to his shoulder, the muzzle bearing full on the tramp.

The old fellow took one long and steady look, then he deliberately put up his own weapon, dropped his head in a dejected manner and "clucked" to his horse.

"Gee-up, Ole Chain-lightnin'," he cried, thumping his heels against the animal's sides. "You kin move erlong with the satisfaction o' knowin' ye kerry ther biggest derned onery no' count triflin' idjot in ther kentry. It was allus thus since childhood's hour. Ta, ta, Reddy. I'll kerry ther news ter Daisy. Now watch this piece o' hoss-flesh skoot like a fiery-tailed comet through ther air. *Go lang!*"

In some way the old fellow succeeded in starting the scrawny animal off at quite a swift pace, and man and horse soon disappeared along the ravine.

As soon as Old Sunflower overtook the outlaw-hunters, he rode directly to Dare's side and related his adventure. Dare was both interested and surprised, but he knew the Bulldogs could not be trusted. Major Mars, who overheard the tramp's story, could not repress a scornful smile, but did not venture his opinion till the Daisy Sport asked for it.

"While Red Hutch's statement that there are some of the outlaws with the party may be true," said the old soldier, "I think it would be the height of folly to pay the slightest attention to anything else he said. If we did, we should stand a good chance of walking into some kind of an ambush. Such ruffians do not experience a change of heart so swiftly. Without a doubt they are still in the employ of Captain Marvel and this High Card Harry."

"I wish we knew the outlaws who are with us," said Dare, a cloud on his face.

"We may be able to pick them out by watching sharp, sar," observed the major.

At this moment a distant shout was heard and a bareheaded, wild-appearing man was seen running toward them, waving his hands.

"What does that mean?" cried Major Mars.

In a few moments the stranger approached near enough to ask:

"Are you a party from Red Hot searching for the retreat of Captain Marvel's band?"

"Bet yer boots," answered several.

"Then I'm in luck!" joyfully cried the man. "Till recently I was Captain Marvel's trusted lieutenant, but yesterday I was seized and confined under penalty of death on some false charge. I was to die at sunset to-night. They confined me in a cave, which was my salvation, for I escaped by a passage through the cave to the outer world. I am here to lead you to that passage. We can all go through and take them by surprise."

"Another trick!" sneered Major Mars.

The robber lieutenant started at the sound of the old soldier's voice and peered sharply, searchingly at Mars. He seemed to see something that filled him with amazement.

"It is no trick," he cried. "It is the truth. The other passage is miles upon miles from here, as you know! Your disguise is very slick, but I have penetrated it. I wonder if your companions know you are—"

Quick as thought the major drew a revolver and fired, sending the robber lieutenant down in an instant!

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE POSY PARDS TRIUMPHANT.

BARELY had Lieutenant Fenton struck the ground when a revolver spoke in his hand like an echo to Major Mars's weapon, and, flinging up his hands with a cry of pain, the old soldier plunged headlong from his horse to the ground, striking with a heavy thud and laying in a quivering heap.

Then the robber lieutenant leaped to his feet, a revolver in each hand, and faced the astounded witnesses of the tragedy, his voice ringing out sharp and clear:

"If any man draws a weapon on me, I shall know he is the friend of this individual who just attempted to wipe me out, and whom I shot in self-defense."

There was an uneasy murmur, and Old Sunflower gasped:

"Great holy jehucus!"

"That man," continued the ex-robber, "is one of Captain Marvel's trusted friends! He was never a soldier, and that beard, that wig, those glasses, all are a skillful disguise. Will some one please investigate, and see if I am not right?"

Instantly Daisy Dare dismounted and bent over the fallen man, who uttered a low moan as he was moved.

"It is true!" cried the sport. "See here!"

He removed the spectacles, the wig, the beard, and then Old Sunflower uttered a shout of amazement:

"It's High Keerd Harry, by Moses!"

"You are right," nodded Lieutenant Fenton.

"I was about to speak his name when he drew and fired. I dropped just in time."

At this moment three of the party suddenly wheeled their horses and, with a shout, went galloping back along the ravine.

"They belong to the band!" cried the robber lieutenant. "Shoot them down!"

A perfect fusilade of bullets were sent after the fleeing men, but not one of them fell from his horse, and in a few seconds they had disappeared.

"We have no time to lose!" exclaimed Fenton. "They will hasten to warn Captain Marvel, but if we move at once, we can get in ahead of them by the way of the cave."

"Then we will move," said Dare, who was convinced by what had transpired that the lieutenant had not come to lead them into a trap.

One of the party was left to look after Harry Harkman and attend to the man's wound as well as he could, while the others moved on at once, some of them grumbling because they had not been given time to lynch the gambler who had deceived them so successfully.

Within thirty minutes they were forced to abandon their horses, leaving one man to look after them, and in less than an hour they reached the entrance to the cave.

"Now every galoot prepare fur hot fighting," said the guide. "In a few minutes we shall reach the retreat."

When the outlaw-hunters reached the cavern opening by the waterfall, where they could look out upon the valley, they saw them rushing hither and thither in apparent alarm.

"They know we're coming," said Lieutenant Fenton. "Follow me!"

Silently the men rushed out of the cave and dashed in single file down the precipitous path, their weapons in readiness. They were quickly discovered, and the robbers gave a great shout, which was answered by a wild cheer.

Mounted on a magnificent horse, Captain Marvel tried to rally his men to battle, but the bandits were panic-stricken by the appearance of their foes at an unlooked-for quarter, and the most of them thought of nothing but flight. Unfortunately, the regular entrance to the valley being unguarded, this was not a difficult thing, and the greater part of the band escaped. Some were slain and a few taken prisoners.

When Captain Marvel saw the day was lost he made an attempt to escape, but from the first Daisy Dare and Old Sunflower had directed their attention toward the robber chief.

"Surrender!" shouted the sport.

"Never!" was the outlaw's answer, as he flung up his band and snapped his revolver with the drop covering Dare's heart. But a cry of rage came from his lips, for the weapon was useless, every cartridge having been discharged.

At this moment a cowboy who was with the party neatly lassoed the robber captain, and when the masked bandit was dragged from his horse to fall heavily to the ground, he lay quite still as if stunned. In a moment Daisy Dare was bending over the fallen chief, and Old Sunflower was at his side.

"Now to see the face beneath this mask!" cried the sport.

And when the mask was removed both Dare and the old tramp uttered cries of amazement.

The face revealed that of a woman—Queen Ada!

Like a flash Dan Dare understood the truth. The wonderful woman had so skillfully played two parts that not even her own followers had suspected the deceit. By doing so her power and influence over the bandits had been doubled, as it were, for she had exerted the firm, yet gentle persuasion of a woman and the stern rule of a mysterious man.

As the Daisy Sport stared in amazement at her white face she opened her eyes and, seeing him, said faintly:

"You have triumphed again."

A hard, cold look settled on the ex-detective's face.

"Woman, where is my wife?" he demanded, icily.

"Coming now two rods behind you," was the reply.

Dare whirled, and the next moment Edna—his Edna—was in his arms. He almost doubted his senses, for he had firmly believed her dead, but there was nothing ghost-like about the warm lips which met his own, and a great cry of thankfulness broke from his heart.

Dropping beside the bandit queen, Old Sunflower soon succeeded in learning where Violet Vane was confined, and with Ione close at his side, he hurried back into the cave. Lighting a torch at the entrance, he led the way along a passage till he came to the prison chamber.

Unbolting the door, he flung it wide open, crying:

"Hyer we are, Sweet Violets, big as life an' jest es natteral, bet yer skin!"

A figure that had been stretched prone upon the rocky floor upreared itself with a start, revealing by the flaring torchlight the baggad face of the Violet Sport.

With a cry, Ione dashed forward, dropping on her knees and clasping her arms around Vane's neck, while she sobbed, joyfully:

"Oh, Philip, Philip!"

He thrust her from him and held her at arm's length, glaring into her face.

"Why do you come here like this?" he cried. "You, the false one—the wife of another!"

Affrighted, she stammered:

"What—what do you mean?"

"As if you did not know!" he sneered. "I saw it all, even though you thought me dead! I saw you become the wife of that double dastard, Captain Marvel, the outlaw!"

A light broke over her face, but before she could speak, Old Sunflower spluttered:

"Jaythutter! Thet must hev bin a curi's weddin' seen' as how Cap Marvel's a woman!"

It was some moments before Vane could realize the situation.

"I knew it all the time," declared Ione. "The marriage was a farce to which I consented that I might escape the attentions of Captain Marvel's lieutenant, who persisted in making love to me. The lieutenant was a witness of the whole affair."

"And so was I," said Vane. "I see this woman deceived you as well as me. She revealed the secret of her sex to you and made you believe the marriage was simply to secure you from the lieutenant's attentions, but she had a deeper purpose than that. But it has ended all right, after all, thank God!"

Old Sunflower waited to bear and see no more. Thrusting the torch into a crevice in the rocks, he said:

"You two kin come out w'en ye git reddy. I kin hear ther boys whoopin' out thar, an' I reckon thar's goin' ter be a lynchin' picnic. Ef so, I want er han'!" And he left them together.

Through the influence of the Posy Pards, the woman captain escaped the speedy punishment which was meted out to those of her followers who had been captured. Queen Ada asked for a moment alone with Violet Vane, a request which was granted.

"Forgive me!" she entreated, her heavenly blue eyes falling on him with a look that brought the blood to his cheeks. "I loved you so! That must be my excuse for everything. I played to win you, for I did my best to make you believe your sweetheart untrue, but now the game has gone against me and I feel you despise me. All my disguises, all my scheming, everything counts for naught! Red Hot will know Madam Midnight no more, for I am she! The mountain trails will know Captain Marvel no more, for he is dead! Dare is more forgiving than I deserve, for he has promised to aid me in slipping away. It is not probable you and I will ever meet again. Good-by!"

She held out her hand, but he shook his head. He dared not touch those soft warm fingers again. He turned away, leaving her with her face buried in her hands.

It was discovered that the outlaw lieutenant, Frank Fenton, was missing, and it was rightly conjectured he had made sure of saving his neck by avoiding the hands of Judge Lynch.

On the return to Red Hot the man detailed to guard High Card Harry was found, but the gambler had escaped the lynchers.

He was dead!

What became of Snaky Slink no man could tell.

The Twin Bulldogs also disappeared, and were never again seen in Red Hot.

The Posy Pards saw that the woman who had caused them so much trouble and suffering was given a good horse and a long start ahead of her would-be destroyers. She was never captured.

The successful outlaw-hunters were welcomed back to Red Hot with loud cheers.

That night there was a merry dance of rejoicing over the successful defeat of the outlaws and the breaking up of the band. Of course every one attended, and the Posy Pards, with their respective sweethearts, were the cynosure of all eyes.

Larry O'Ray played the fiddle, and, as Old Sunflower observed, "he jest made ther catgut howl."

THE END.

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